

**“Homes for human beings”
— A spatial reading of Ibsen’s
*The Master Builder***

By

Marinette Grimbeek

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
MPhil in Ibsen Studies**

Senter for Ibsen-studier

Universitetet i Oslo

Mai 2007

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my two years of study at the Centre for Ibsen Studies would not have been possible without the scholarship I received from Statens Lånekassen under the auspices of the Quota Scheme.

Secondly, I want to thank all the staff at the Centre for Ibsen Studies, not only the various lecturers, but also the administrative personnel and the librarians. A special word of gratitude should also go to Frode Helland, my supervisor, who has shown immense patience with my somewhat haphazard working methods.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, especially my sister and parents, for many reasons, which I will not even attempt to list. Naming friends who have been there for me in various ways will be lengthy, and possibly unfair, as I am bound to overlook someone. However, a small exception would have to be made for two people – thanks for everything, Martin and Jens.

Oslo, May 2007

Contents

Preface.....	i
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 “Space”: Definition, theory and literature	2
1.1.1 Towards a definition of space	2
1.1.2 Theoretical overview and literature review	4
1.1.3 Delimitation of the thesis	15
1.2 Space, time and modernity	16
1.2.1 Defining “modernity”	16
1.2.2 Space and time in modernity.....	18
1.2.3 Solness caught between two worlds?.....	22
Chapter 2: The setting and performance space of <i>The Master Builder</i>	27
2.1 Undermining realism	28
2.1.1 The house on stage.....	28
2.1.2 The (un)importance of words.....	32
2.2 The performance space in the text of <i>The Master Builder</i>	37
2.2.1 Text vs. performance	37
2.2.2 The first act	45
2.2.3 The second act.....	70
2.2.4 The third act	78
2.2.5 The progressive nature of the settings of the three acts	86
Chapter 3: The uncanny imagery of <i>The Master Builder</i>	91
3.1 The uncanny nature of repetition	92
3.2 Repetition in <i>The Master Builder</i>	94
3.3 “Houses for people” vs. “Homes for human beings”	98
Chapter 4: Castles in the air: Memories, dreams and utopia in <i>The Master Builder</i>	108
4.1 The changing promise.....	108
4.2 Memories	111
4.3 Heterotopia?	114
Conclusion	119
Bibliography	123
Appendix A.....	129
Appendix B	130

Preface

“Tja, det er jo bare mitt eget fag.”

— Henrik Ibsen¹

In this thesis I attempt a close reading of Henrik Ibsen's 1892 play *The Master Builder*, especially in the light of its spatial aspects. In my view there are persuasive arguments to be made for the importance of spatial imagery in several of Ibsen's plays, either as regards the use of stage space or in connection with imagery. There are the plays in which outdoor space plays an important role (think for example of the sweeping scenery of *Peer Gynt*) or presents a (potentially fatal) physical threat to the characters as, for example, in *Brand*, *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*. In *The Lady from the Sea* the contrast between confinement and freedom is expressed in spatial terms with the juxtaposition between the fjord and the open sea. Then there are the sometimes unsettling indoor spaces which appear in some of the modern prose plays; for instance, the loft and studio of the Ekdal home, or the upstairs room to which John Gabriel Borkman has kept himself confined. Furthermore, there are plays which refer in their titles to homes or architectural elements, such as *Rosmersholm*, *A Doll's House*, *Pillars of Society*, and, of course, *The Master Builder*, which I am discussing here, where the protagonist and title character is by profession concerned with spatial matters, and has dedicated much of his working life to building “homes for human beings” (p. 810).² One may indeed go so far as to say that Ibsen

¹ Erik Werenskiold told an anecdote about asking Ibsen in Kristiania in the 1890s if he liked architecture, which was recounted by Kolskegg (the pseudonym of Gunnar Larsen), “Erik Werenskiold og Henrik Isen”, *Dagbladet*, no 68, Tuesday the 20th of March 1928, Oslo, p. 4; citation from Erik Henning Edvardsen, *Ibsens Christiania* (Oslo: N.W. Damm & Søn, 2003), p. 103. Throughout, full biographical details are only given in the footnotes if the work concerned does not appear in the core bibliography.

² Unless otherwise specified, all English citations are from Rolf Fjelde's translations as found in *The Complete Major Prose Plays* and all Norwegian ones are from the *Hundreårsutgave*, (in which case the page number is preceded by the volume number in roman numerals).

shows a predilection for presenting and interpreting the bourgeois house of his time, and its frequent failure to be a real home.³ This is not only an issue in *The Master Builder*, but also in *When We Dead Awaken*, and even more famously so, in *A Doll House*. In fact, the moment arguably most readily associated with Ibsen's prose plays is Nora's slamming of the door behind her when she leaves her husband and children behind after realising that she is first and foremost a human being, not a doll, wife or mother. The view that spatial concerns dominate Ibsen's corpus is also expressed in the (perhaps apocryphal) anecdote with which this preface opened. Even though I consistently shy away from the temptation to involve Ibsen's biography in my reading of the play, it is interesting to know, in the light of the persistent spatial concerns in his work, that he might have likened his art to architecture so unequivocally. In my view, the ultimately spatial nature of *The Master Builder* does not only pertain to its literal setting and the ubiquity of images related to building (and, by extension, to spatiality), but also sheds light on the characters and their strained relationships with each other and to "reality" or "truth", as I try to show in my reading of the play.

When one proposes discussing "space", the term immediately begs some clarification, despite (or perhaps as a result of) its relative prevalence in recent cultural and literary discourse. The question of definition is one I discuss more comprehensively in the introduction, and perhaps a short indication of the organisation of the thesis is now in order. In the rest of the introduction I give an overview of the most important theoretical perspectives and terminology I use in my discussion, combined with a literature review, a delimitation of the thesis and a short introduction to the question of the changing perception and rendering of space in modernity. Here I focus on the

³ This argument is the starting point of Mark Sandberg's article "Ibsen and the Mimetic Home of Modernity" in which he asserts that "Ibsen visualizes the pressures on the individual in architectural terms" (2001:33-4).

changing relationship between *space* and *time* in modernity, a subject to which I often return throughout the remaining chapters. The main section concentrates on the text of *The Master Builder* and the functions and implications of its spatiality. Although the discussions overlap here to a certain degree, I have decided to divide the main section into three chapters: a longer one dealing with the current Solness home as the setting of the play, and two shorter ones on the often uncanny spatial imagery of the play and on the spatial significance of memory, dreams and the utopian impulse of *The Master Builder*, respectively. The thesis concludes with a summary, core bibliography of cited works and appendices.

Yet, before commencing the introduction with its discussion of theory and terminology, a few more fundamental questions pertaining to this thesis need to be considered. Why specifically select *The Master Builder* from Ibsen's plays? Why choose a spatial approach at all? Is this a valid method, if it can even be called one? What are the advantages to choosing such an approach? And, consequently, what may its handicaps be?

I chose *The Master Builder*, as one might expect, mainly because of personal interest. It was one of the first plays of Ibsen that I had read and, on reading the play, my general impression of Ibsen as a slightly stale, bourgeois and realistic Victorian playwright immediately changed into fascination. There is something elusive about this play which simultaneously invites and mocks closer examination – it seems to raise more questions with each rereading, while stubbornly refusing to give any unambiguous answers. This trait, incidentally, led the British author Israel Zangwill

(1864-1926) to dub it “The Master Bewilderer”.⁴ This is of course not a characteristic peculiar to *The Master Builder* and absent from the rest of Ibsen’s works. On the contrary. Yet, its rich imagery and perplexing dialogue make this play especially intriguing, in my view.

Choosing to discuss space in Ibsen may seem a bit arbitrary, as his plays provide one with such a complex web of meaning and resulting opportunities for interpretation. With *The Master Builder*, a special case for a spatial appreciation of the play may however be made in view of the play’s subject-matter. As I argue more fully in the thesis, *The Master Builder* lends itself to a discussion of spatiality, since it does not only have a professional purveyor⁵ of space as its central character, but also seems to be dominated by various spatial concerns. I seek to present an argument which advances spatial matters as being at the heart of the play; dominating the play to a certain extent, both as causes and effects. Yet, a spatial approach, precisely due to the lack of an unambiguous definition and clear methodology, gives one a wealth of possible approaches in itself. One may go about it taking one of a variety of cultural-historical, philosophical or psychological perspectives as a point of departure. To me this fluidity seems reflective of the ambivalence of the play itself. Additionally, because of the very nature of the work in question, because it is written as a play, and not as a novel, for instance, another spatial dimension enters the scene. The theatre is in itself a peculiar space and any text written with this in mind accordingly

⁴ Quoted in Holbrook Jackson’s *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of the Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Harvester Press, 1976 [1913]), p. 211.

⁵ For space indeed has become a commodity*. In our own age in which deals are more often than not performed in “cyberspace”, in which international rules about aerospace exist and in which (dis)information has become as much a commodity as food and labour, this comment does not seem out of place. In this reading I discuss the ambiguous conception of space in modernity, and especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the commoditisation of space increased on various levels and in a variety of ways.

* In connection with this, cf. especially Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work *The Production of Space*.

incorporates a very specific notion of spatiality. Therefore, a type of double-spatiality seems to be concerned when discussing the spatiality of a drama. This is an issue I address at some length in the thesis, by discussing both the performance space of the play and the predominance of spatial imagery in the text.

This inevitably brings the discussion to the next point in question, namely, whether a spatial approach can be seen as a “valid” approach to the play, and, by extension, to Ibsen, or even literature as a whole (if the implied homogeneity of that term can be overlooked for the moment). Because of the vagueness surrounding the term space and the concept of spatiality, it is quite easy to stray into either the slavish imposition of the theory of a specific thinker on the play, getting the play to correspond to the chosen theory by forcing certain interpretations on it, or to render everything so relative that not even moderately conclusive statements may be made. Here I try to stay in the golden mean between these two extremes, although perhaps at times veering from side to side. I aim to point out in my reading how some of these theories and concepts may be connected to certain points in question, but try to work from the basis of the text’s internal spatial logic. The main purpose of the reading, then, is to show, in the light of theories of spatiality and the cultural-historical background of the play, how the spatiality of *The Master Builder* is one of the dominating elements of the play and informs its characters and action on a range of levels.

Chapter 1

Introduction

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.

— Peter Brook¹

The problem is that any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, projected, dreamt of, speculated about. What texts can be considered special enough to provide the basis for a “textual” analysis?

— Henri Lefebvre²

This introduction is divided into two related sections. In the first I discuss the difficulty in defining space in a more general way, and then shift the focus to the concept of space and spatiality in literature and the theatre, where I give an overview of the most important of the theoretical concepts used in the thesis, as well as a literature review. This is followed by a short delimitation of the thesis. Yet, since I do not wish to divorce the work entirely from its cultural and societal context, which may indeed be said to constitute a type of space from which it originated and within which it to a large degree still exists (insofar as the late nineteenth century provides a cultural-historical framework for its interpretation). The second section therefore briefly covers the changing perception of space and time in modernity. Here I especially look at the notion of the separation of space and time and the new importance accorded negative space in the late nineteenth century.

¹ From *The Empty Space* (1968:9).

² From *The Production of Space* (1991:15). Lefebvre continues to argue that texts dealing with architecture may be better suited to an analysis of space than literary texts proper, but also finds this solution problematic, as he does the idea of investigating spatiality on the basis of general scientific notions.

1.1 “Space”: Definition, theory and literature

1.1.1 *Towards a definition of space*

The term “space” is used in various different ways, ranging from the very general to the highly specialised, across a variety of different fields and disciplines, encompassing such diverse subjects as physics, philosophy, architecture,³ sociology, astronomy and even typesetting. This very wide usage may be said to indicate a degree of ambivalence about the term, but certainly also serves to signify the ubiquity of space.

That the word “space” can denote various different things depending on the context in which it is used, is for example clearly illustrated by the length of the relevant entry as found in the 16th volume of the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*)⁴ from 1989. The usage of the noun is investigated over more than 14 columns, at three to a page, with almost another full column devoted to the use of the word as a verb. One of the most conspicuous things about the entry on space in the *OED* is the frequent mention of time and the established tradition of this usage in the English language. In fact, the first four main meanings of the word given in the *OED* are, denoting time or duration; time, leisure, or opportunity for doing something; the amount or extent of time comprised in a specific period; and a period or interval of time. These four entries all have various sub-entries and some notes on the historical usage of the word in these senses, with the oldest examples all coming from the start

³ The German architect Alex Schultes (b. 1943) remarked, “Mit keinem anderen Begriff der Architektenwelt wird soviel Schindluder getrieben, wird soviel Unsinn verzapft, soviel Chaos in die Köpfe gebracht wie mit unserem so heißgeliebten Traum vom Raum” (cited in Ott 2003:113).

⁴ The voluminous complete *Oxford English Dictionary* is widely regarded as the standard and most authoritative dictionary of the language. Cf. in this regard, for example, Dick Leith, *A Social History of English* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 68-9, James Gordon, *The English Language: An Historical Introduction* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972), pp. 263-5 and David Graddol *et al* (eds.), *English: History, Diversity and Change* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 163.

of the fourteenth century, when the language was strictly speaking still Middle English, rather than an early version of modern English as we know it.⁵ The other senses of the word recorded by the dictionary mainly fall in the category of indicating either a limited or unlimited expanse or distance, and then more specific usages, such as in the fields of music and printing. A brief listing of just some of these meanings as noted by the *OED* indicates the diversity of senses in which the word may be used: linear *distance*, interval between two objects; superficial extent or area, extent in three dimensions, *sometimes with a specific purpose* (room); continuous, unbounded or *limitless extent* in either direction, regarded a *void* of matter or without reference to it; the *immeasurable expanse* in which the solar and stellar systems are situated; a *certain stretch*, extent or area of surface, ground, sky; a more or less *limited area* or extent; the *dimensional extent occupied by a body*. The further entries on the use of the word as a verb mainly centre on the act of ordering or providing adequate space in between things and measuring, dividing, or limiting as regards space. Although I here only look at the definition of space in the English language, the problem of definition is by no means restricted to English. As I have tried to indicate by emphasising some words in these definitions, there seems to be something inherently ambivalent in the word. It may both be used to denote finiteness and infinity; measurability and immeasurability; occupation and emptiness. This dialectic between the knowable and unknowable has played a considerable role in the development of the concept of space, something I discuss in a little more detail in the second section of this chapter. In my reading of the spatiality in *The Master Builder*, I look especially at the

⁵ Charles Barber, for instance, dates Early Middle English from 1100-1300 and Late Middle English from 1300-1500, with Early Modern English starting from 1500 in *Early Modern English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997), p. viii *et seqq.*, which roughly corresponds with the dates adopted by James Gordon in *The English Language: An Historical Introduction* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1997).

relationship between physical space (particularly in the sense of setting) and the thematics of the play.

1.1.2 Theoretical overview and literature review

Some aspect of spatiality may be found in almost all texts, as Henri Lefebvre argues in the quote with which this chapter opened. Likewise texts specifically on spatiality abound. The literature on space and spatiality spans a great many subjects and disciplines, as the complex usage of the word “space” noted above anticipates. It is ubiquitous in the fields of philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, architecture and cultural studies and varies in scope and approach from the dreamlike *Poetics of Space* by the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard to factual accounts of spatial planning. Furthermore, it also underlies some of the fundamentals of physics, as, for example, the works of Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein’s writings on relativity.

Perhaps the first text written on spatiality in literature addressing the modern sense of the concept is Joseph Frank’s controversial essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”.⁶ Here Frank describes what he sees as the peculiarly spatial form modern literature takes on. Even though I do not completely agree with his rather restrictive view on the nature of literary spatiality, this essay has been so influential in the study of space in literature that it could hardly be ignored. Another perspective on the idea of space and literature which I have found immensely helpful is Knut Brynhildsvoll’s *Der literarische Raum* (1993). His notion of literary space is much more wide-reaching than that of Frank and also much closer to what I had in mind at the outset of

⁶ This essay first appeared in 1945 in the *Sewanee Review* and was subsequently edited and republished a few times, appearing in various forms in different collections of essays. For this thesis I have mainly used its 1991 incarnation, as published in *The Idea of Spatial Form*.

this project. Brynhildsvoll holds that literary space should be seen as everything in the text that in general corresponds to the world (1993:8).

One of the most problematic points about Frank's article is his understanding that the spatiality of modern literature can be found in the rejection of a chronological sequence as the basis the basis for conveying the meaning of a work of prose or poetry. He emphatically states that modern poetry and the modern novel are intended to be apprehended spatially, as a moment in time, rather than as a sequence (1991:10). Frank names T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* as paramount examples of the manifestation of a spatial form of literature and holds that in order for these works to be properly understood, the word-groups (which are not always connected syntactically, but rather by a perception of a relation between them) should be juxtaposed and perceived simultaneously (1991:14).⁷ These word-groups do of course follow each other chronologically as the poem or novel is read, but Frank emphasises that their meanings do not depend on this essentially temporal relationship (*loc. cit.*). This rejection of temporality immediately presents a problem to my discussion of the spatiality of *The Master Builder*, since a play to some degree always has a sequential nature – even a play by Ibsen which relies on events that have already occurred, particularly through the use of the retrospective technique). It unfolds in time on the stage, or in reading. Even if it can perhaps only be grasped in full when the whole has been revealed, this does not do away with the fact that it is structured

⁷ Frank states that *Ulysses* is composed “of a vast number of references and cross references which relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative” (1991:18). I think, however, discarding the temporal side of *Ulysses* may be too much of an oversimplification, especially in the light of the fundamental structural fact that the novel's action takes place within a single day in Dublin, which mirrors the twenty year voyage of Odysseus, as recounted in Homer's *Odyssey*. Yet, the intertextuality of the references in the novel does give it a certain spatiality, in Frank terms. Similarly, I think, the curious use of memory (true or false) and the element of repetition lend *The Master Builder* a type of spatiality, and an air of being episodic, rather than fluently chronologic.

temporally. *The Master Builder* is of course ostensibly organised in a sequential way, with its division into three acts (which follow each other chronologically, at least as far as the present is concerned).

The notion of the mutual exclusivity of temporality and spatiality which Frank espouses is one of the aspects of his theory which has attracted the most criticism. Brynhildsvoll, as Kermode (esp. 1978:582), sees the danger of Frank's insistence on the separation of the temporal from the spatial as resulting in space from which the "element of depth" has been removed, in which everything consequently enters the realm of myth (1993:20-1), while all modern literature, despite its frequent preoccupation with mythology, can surely not be called "myth". Frank is aware of this problem, even though he tends to see it as an unsolvable paradox, rather than a fundamental flaw, because he comments on "the internal conflict between the time-logic of language and the space-logic implicit in the modern conception of the nature of poetry" (1994:16). As I argue below, however, language can be seen to take on a spatial form, especially in the theatre, without requiring an attempt at denying its temporal nature. Another suggestion in Frank's conception of spatiality that I do not quite agree with, is that he seems to suggest that it could only ever result from a deliberate spatial project. In footnotes to the 1991 edition of this essay Frank responds to Walter Sutton's criticism that his theory "does violence...to the actual experience of reading" (1957:112-3), since the act of reading is inherently temporal by arguing that "this has not stopped modern writers from working out techniques to achieve the impossible – as much as possible" (Frank 1991:66). I rather think of spatiality as inherently part of literature, conveying as much meaning by its conspicuous absence as by its overt presence, in much the same way as the temporal

aspects of a work. I am also of the opinion that spatiality does not only arise from a deliberate attempt to do away with the sequential structure of language, since meaning is, to a large degree, dependent on this very sequentiality. If one would accept all the conditions Frank sets for a work to meet in order to be truly spatial in nature, the long poems and novels he holds up as prime examples of spatial literature would necessarily *not* qualify. One cannot conceive of taking in all of *Ulysses*, for instance, in an instant. Neither would the repetition and haunting rhythms of *The Waste Land* have the same impact, could the whole somehow be appreciated at once, instead of unfolding over the five parts of the poem. Only very short forms of literature, like the haiku (as Sutton observes in 1957:117) and some of the most radical forms of surrealist poetry, in which the poems quite literally take on shapes due to the innovative use of typefaces and layouts, would qualify as spatial, should one follow Frank's restrictions to the letter.⁸ Even in the case of these poems, the reader inevitably chooses a starting point and from there read in some kind of order, thus creating temporal links between words and deriving meaning from these connections even though they were perhaps not intended. The act of reading, as the act of theatre performance, is inevitably temporal, because language functions in a sequential way.

As mentioned, Brynhildsvoll's conception of literary space differs widely from that of Frank. He sees it as the mediated result of one or more of the inner perceptions of the text; therefore the worldview and perspective of the text in question are announced by its spatial aspects (1993:8). He distinguishes two basic attitudes to space: a *primary* attitude, according to which space is directly rendered from observation, and a

⁸ This is, in my view, highly problematic, because I think for the most part surrealist poetry has been a highly entertaining and creative experiment, but it lacks some of the nuances of "conventional", temporally organised literature. This may partly be due to the much smaller corpus of existing works, but I also think that the endeavour to create something from words which ought to be apprehended *only* spatially ultimately proved to present a problem which is insurmountable.

secondary one, which sees space solely as a medium for visualising the non-spatial (1993:11) and also lists six different attitudes to the manifestation of literally space.⁹ Thus a spectrum of attitudes towards space is created. On the one end one finds an independent factual world, with a loose interdependence between space and characters, with literal relationships between space and characters. On the opposite end of the spectrum a “distanceless spiritualisation” of space takes place and space takes on a mythical character (Brynhildsvoll 1993:8-9). This classification is useful, in that it provides a frame of reference for the comparison of the spatial aspects of different literary works, something which, as Brynhildsvoll justifiably remarks, is more difficult to define than their temporal counterparts, since the chronological characteristics relating to the temporality of texts are relatively easy to identify and apply to different texts, while this same comparability certainly do not exist in the spatial sphere (1993:7). Brynhildsvoll also stresses that works often display a combination of these attitudes towards space, or in-between types, though he distinguishes clear, overarching approaches to spatiality; namely a).space as an autonomous area; b).a fusion of outer and inner space; and c).an attitude towards spatiality which depends on the availability of a “creator” to endow articles with entirely different functions (1993:10). In the third chapter on the imagery of *The Master Builder*, I refer to these categories proposed by Brynhildsvoll to examine the interrelatedness between the physical space of the play and the abstract character this space takes on.

The relationship between space and the theatre is complex, and perhaps more so than the quotation from Peter Brook at the start of the chapter seems to indicate. Brook

⁹ A short paraphrase of this list may be found appended to the thesis as Appendix A.

does continue to say that we do not generally mean theatre to be just an empty space as he uses it here, but that we include all the trappings and conventions we associate with theatre in the word, thus creating a “messy image covered by one all-purpose word” (1968:9). In her book *Space in Performance*, Gay McAuley distinguishes between different types of space in the theatre and discusses how these are relevant to performance. She emphasises that theatre, of all the arts, appears to be inherently spatial in nature, since it is

perhaps the only art form in which the name given to the place where the artistic event occurs, or where the art object is displayed, is the same as that of the art form itself. Popular usage has thus encapsulated for English speakers a perception of the vital connection between physical space and the artistic communication in question...

(1999:1)

Throughout her study, McAuley emphasises that the specific nature of theatre does not reside in its relation to the dramatic, but “it consists essentially of the interaction between performers and spectators in a given space” (1999:5). Yet, because of the complicated generic and practical relationships between a play (drama) and a play (performance), I think it quite necessary to take some account of performance as it manifests itself in the text of *The Master Builder*, which is of course my main focus in this discussion. Ibsen could have written the text as a novel instead and his plays do indeed bear some resemblance to the novel, but it is written within the generic conventions of drama, thus unavoidably evoking the theatre, even when it is just read, and not performed.¹⁰

By drawing on the terminology of many different other scholars of performance, such as that of Anne Ubersfeld, Denis Bablet, Steen Jansen, Patrice Pavis, Hanna

¹⁰ The correspondence between the novel and Ibsen’s dramas is something I discuss in more detail in the following chapter. Jon Nygaard, for instance, stresses the importance of the text in Ibsen, arguing that Ibsen “insisted on writing books for readers, not scripts for the theatre” (1997:97).

Scolnicov, Tim Fitzpatrick and Michael Issacharoff, McAuley proposes a rather complex “taxonomy of spatial function in the theatre” (1999:25). In the taxonomy she proposes, she first identifies five major areas, which are in turn divided into various sub-categories. In the next chapter, I attempt a reading of the text in which an analysis of its performance space plays a substantial role. In that analysis I draw upon McAuley’s terminology (1999:24-34), and therefore I now give a short overview of the terms she proposes which I use extensively.¹¹ McAuley locates *performance space* in the interaction between the audience and the performers. She places considerable emphasis on the duality of the physical and the fictional during a performance. The physical presence of the stage during performance she calls *stage space* and she locates *presentational space* as constituted by the scenery, décor, set, actors, props and lighting, which is in effect superimposed on the stage space. She stresses that the physical presence of the actor(s) is the most important factor in making this space presentational in nature. In my analysis, I substitute “actors” with the presence of the characters in the scene concerned. *Fictional places* are those spaces “presented, represented or evoked onstage and off” (1999:29). McAuley emphasises that the fictional place is broader than the locus dramatis, although that is included in this space. According to her the most important “is not the number of places nor even the method by which they are suggested but their anchorage in relation to the physical space” (1999:30). She distinguishes between *onstage* and *offstage* fictional places, the latter of which may be either *localised* or *unlocalised* in relation to performance space. The spatial references included in the stage directions and dialogue of the dramatic text itself is called *textual space*. McAuley stresses that “textual space is made really meaningful only in performance” and that the text and

¹¹ A short overview of her complete taxonomy can be found appended to the thesis as Appendix B.

performance are interactive in creating meaning (1999:32). I think, however, that what she calls textual space in relation to performance may give many useful insights to the reader of the text. Therefore I examine performance space in considerable detail in the light of the spatial indications of the text in my discussion of the setting of the play in the next chapter. Lastly, McAuley identifies *thematic space* as essentially the way in which all the other types of spatiality interact to create meaning. She also argues, however, that this meaning is conveyed irrespective of “whether one is working exclusively with the play as written text or with the play in performance” (1999:32). This seems to me to undermine her absolute emphasis on the importance of performance, which she insists on throughout her study, for example by holding that “the dramatic fiction can be experienced only through the presentational reality of the performance, and that both are embedded within the social reality of the total event is crucial to the theatre function” (McAuley 1999:251). I am, however, in complete agreement with her notion that meaning may be conveyed through either the text or the performance, as quoted above, and the investigation of performance space in the text itself is my main concern in the first part of the next chapter.

Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* states as its aim to show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of man and continues to emphasise that the daydream is the binding principle in this integration (1994:6). Bachelard’s text is essentially a phenomenological exploration of the house and its centrality in what is so important in much of his work, namely reverie and dreaming. As such, it may be said to be an exploration of especially presentational and thematic space, in McAuley’s terminology. This approach appears to me to be particularly well-suited to the subject-matter of *The Master Builder*. In

the following chapters I argue that the spatiality of the play is to a large extent dominated by the image of the house. Solness is a builder and designer of houses, and the different houses in the play are all important, not just thematically, but also mimetically and even structurally, since the current Solness house is also the setting for the play, and the new house which Solness is building governs much of the thematic and offstage space of the play, as does the burned-down childhood home of Aline Solness. Further, the project of building castles in the air appears closely related to Bachelard's emphasis on the importance of the house in facilitating daydreaming. That the imagery connected to daydreams in this play also concerns houses or building, lends a sort of doubling to the image of the house in *The Master Builder*, and, as I attempt to show in my discussion, this is but one of the cases in the play in which different levels of meaning and reality may be distinguished.

In the field of Ibsen Studies, spatiality has been treated in different ways. Brynhildsvoll sees the form space takes on in the late work of Ibsen as the continuing result of a past that cannot be changed, which intrudes on and overshadows the present, and argues in favour of a spatial reading of the later works of Ibsen, in which he identifies a coalescence of space and time which, under extreme conditions, leads to a condition of pure duration, in which time approximates space (1993:33). One of the most influential and comprehensive studies of Ibsen's use of stage directions and settings (i.e. textual space) is John Northam's *Ibsen's Dramatic Method*, which maintains that "Ibsen presents his characters not only through dialogue but also through the suggestiveness of visual details contained in his visually important stage-directions" (1953:11). In this respect I have also drawn upon the section on Ibsen in Jon Nygaard's *Teatrets historie i Europa* (1992) and on his article "Ibsen and the

Drama of Modernity” (1997). Erik Østerud identifies “two different ‘types of drama’” which are continuously in conflict in Ibsen (cf., for example, *Theatrical and Narrative Space* 1998:10). The first he calls “sacred drama” or the “drama of myth and ritual celebration” and the second “avant-garde drama” or the “drama of modernity” (1998:10-11). He sees the source of the conflict as originating in their “opposite conceptions of the present moment” with the sacred drama expressed in “cosmic-spatial categories” and the avant-garde drama presenting events in a “framework of temporal and historical change” (1998:11). In the same way, Østerud describes the “question of truth” in *The Master Builder* as “related to the question of being: a confrontation between an ‘antique’ or mythical ‘being in space’ and a ‘modern’ ‘being in time’” (2002:61). I think, however, that these categories cannot be seen as mutually exclusive, since mythology also has temporal aspects and the avant-garde addresses some spatial concerns. Similarly, Jørgen Dines Johansen follows Issacharoff in distinguishing between mimetic (represented) and diegetic (narrative) space in his discussion of the spatiality in the last plays of Ibsen (2002). The main difference between these two types of space, according to his use of the terms, is that mimetic space is that which is presented on stage through the props and scenery, while diegetic space is only related through the dialogue (2002:133-4). This would then roughly correspond to McAuley’s categories of presentational and intra-dialogic textual space, respectively. Dines Johansen continues to subdivide diegetic space into three different types, namely a). comments on and descriptions of the visual space in the dialogue; b). narratives about past spaces; and c). imagined spaces, which may be situated either in the past or the future (2002:134). In the specific case of *The Master Builder* then, these last two categories overlap to a certain extent, and, in my view, the

uncertainty about the measure to which they overlap creates many of the ambiguities and difficulties of interpretation one encounters.

Another way in which spatiality has been explored (particularly in relation to *The Master Builder*), is from a cultural-historical point of view. Helge Rønning has been especially prolific in this regard. Other interpretations of the play that make use of the cultural-historical approach I have drawn on are a conference paper by Astrid Sæther entitled “The Significance of “Place” in the Age of Decadence: A Reading of Three Plays by Henrik Ibsen” (1998) and Mark Sandberg’s article “Ibsen and the Mimetic Home of Modernity” (2002). Another interesting recent approach to spatiality in Ibsen may be found in the third chapter of Elisabeth Oxfeldt’s *Nordic Orientalism* (2005) in which she discusses the fourth act of *Peer Gynt* in the light of Edward Said’s conception of orientalism and against the backdrop of 1867 Paris *Exposition Universelle*. A number of substantial studies of Ibsen have relatively recently been published and I have had the pleasure of gaining many interesting perspectives from them. Here I think especially of Asbjørn Aarseth’s *Ibsens samtidsskuespill* (1999), Frode Helland’s *Melankoliens spill* (2000), Atle Kittang’s *Ibsens heroisme* (2002), Helge Rønning’s *Den umulige friheten* (2006) and Toril Moi’s *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (2006).

In the more specific discussions in the rest of the thesis I have selectively made use of some works concerning the subjects under discussion. My choice here has mostly been determined by what I was already familiar with, topicality and a general consensus on the relevance of the works concerned and further limited by the

restricted time at my disposal. These works will be drawn upon and introduced as necessary in the course of these discussions.

1.1.3 Delimitation of the thesis

The nature and scope of the thesis necessitates some limitations to the subject-matter which can possibly be covered. If I had wished to consult all the literature pertaining to space and spatiality, or all the literature on *The Master Builder*, for that matter, I would probably still have been reading long after finishing the writing of this, and therefore some choices had to be made. Both because of my own lack of expertise and because of the limitations as regard the length of this project, I have not concentrated much on the theoretical literature from the fields of physics and architecture, except where general ideas and concepts have been used in the light of the broad cultural and intellectual climate of modernity. Although I do take the general cultural climate of the late nineteenth century into consideration, I have almost completely shied away from the question of Ibsen's biography and the measure to which it may or may not have influenced his work, and from the possible intentions of the author. Because of the substantial body of literature which already exists on Ibsen and modernity, I have mostly limited myself in this regard to the topic of space and time in modernity, and the way in which this relates to my spatial reading of *The Master Builder*. Also, in the next chapter I limited my detailed discussion of performance space to the first act of the play, while just discussing selected examples from the second and last acts in the same way. This was done partly to avoid a certain amount of repetition, and partly because of the length restrictions of the thesis.

1.2 Space, time and modernity

1.2.1 Defining “modernity”

The views on modernity are quite varied in definition and emphasis. There are a vast number of reasons for the differences between these definitions, many of which can broadly be defined as ideological, in my view. Marshall Berman identifies three phases of modernity: the first phase roughly spans the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the second starts with the French Revolution; and the third phase starts in the twentieth century when modernisation becomes a global phenomenon (1982:17-18). Fredric Jameson recounts a substantial number of events which have been described as the starting points of modernity (2002:31-32). He refers to these as “narrative options”, thus underlining the ideological considerations involved in the definition of modernity. The possible beginnings of modernity Jameson mentions are: the Protestant Reformation (viewed as the start of modernity in the German philosophical tradition); Descartes (who introduced the self-conscious/reflexive quality of modernity); the conquest of the Americas; the French Revolution; the Enlightenment; Galileo; the emergence of capitalism; the emergence of a historicist reflexivity or sense of history; secularisation (the death of god, as announced by Nietzsche); the rationalisation inherent in the second or bureaucratic stage of industrial capitalism (seen as the start of modernity by Max Weber); aesthetic modernism (the reification of language and emergence of formal abstractions); or the Soviet revolution. Anthony Giddens proposes a relatively simple provisional definition of modernity as “modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence” (1990:1).

Before moving on to a more detailed discussion of space and time in modernity, the difference between the concepts *modernity* and *modernism* should briefly be noted. A full exploration of the relationship between these terms is beyond the scope of the current discussion, so I opt for a relatively simple (one may even call it simplistic) distinction between them. For the sake of this discussion, therefore, modernity refers to a period in time in which certain social features can be observed (such as the use of capital, the rise of socialism or increased mechanisation), while modernism is an aesthetic category, especially as applied to artistic works from the late nineteenth century until the Second World War, which are generally seen to display some common characteristics, such as a preoccupation with the experience of the individual (which in literature perhaps most famously found expression in the stream of consciousness technique of narration). The works generally seen as modernist are of course not nearly as homogenous as this over-arching appellation seems to imply, but that is a discussion I am not going to enter into at present.

Out of necessity, especially Jameson and Giddens investigate modernity by looking back from our own age, and, importantly, with the primary objective of understanding the *present*. Jameson's notion of the dialectical relationship between the break and the period in the view of the modern (2002:24), which arises from the apparent distinction between the "cyclical" and "typological" versions of the modern (2002:20-21), is in my view helpful in looking at the different conceptions of modernity. The cyclical view is ostensibly illustrated by the use of the word "Renaissance", whilst according to the typological view one period is seen as the completion of another, preceding era. Jameson prefers to describe the cyclical as an awareness of history invested in the feeling of a radical break, and the typological as giving attention to a

whole period and sensing that the current era is somehow analogous to a previous period (*loc. cit.*). This dialectical relationship is evident in current theoretical discourse about modernity, but equally pervaded the understanding of the present in the nineteenth century. Rieger and Dauton emphasise that some who lived through the latter part of the nineteenth century “redoubled their efforts to preserve or recapture aspects of the past in order to anchor the present in history” (2001:5).¹² This is something explored in some detail by Mark Sandberg in his article “Ibsen and the Mimetic Home of Modernity” in which he discusses, among other things, the development of the folk-museum movement in Scandinavia during this period.

1.2.2 Space and time in modernity

As observed in the section concerning the definition of space, a connection between the concepts of space and time has already been established by the early fourteenth century in English usage of the word “space”. This is before the period of modernity has begun (cf. the definitions mentioned above). In philosophical circles, space and time are habitually mentioned and discussed together. This is perhaps due to some of the curious characteristics they share, such as infinity, invisibility and continuity. Furthermore there is the difficulty in empirically verifying the existence of space and time alike, without resorting to the other term in such an explanation. This is more acutely the case in the description of space, perhaps, since it is often seen as mere

¹² The authors then list some “inventions of traditions” that took place in modernity, such as idealisations of village life, the revival of the folk-song tradition, and (at least in Britain, the focal point of their study) the cult of the monarchy, which reached unknown heights during the Victorian period. As an alternative to this effective romanticisation of the past, the authors mention other models, which in essence focussed on tracing a line of “intelligible development” towards modernity as manifested at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. They conclude that “conceptions of the ‘modern’ present as a time of change and transition bore a deep historical imprint that contemporaries formulated by stressing either discontinuities or continuities between the past and the present” (2001:5-6).

emptiness, whilst the passing of time is more evident in natural cycles. The development of a conception of space is further inextricably bound to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the scientific advances of the nineteenth century, which are all *periods of modernity*. The notions of space and time now appear fundamental to most philosophical and, by extension, aesthetical discussion, and had done so at least since the time of Newton.¹³ In the second half of the nineteenth century a multiplication of spaces took place due to, amongst other things: the appearance of non-Euclidean mathematics; the opening of “spaces of the unconscious” by the new media of film and photography and the rise of psychoanalysis; the newly developed fields of knowledge such as sociology, and ethnology which were dedicated to the comparative study of social and cultural spaces; the development of an existential emphasis on space in philosophy; the formulating of spatial concepts in architecture; and the transformation of stylistic analysis into analyses of the importance of space in the fields of history of art (Ott 2003:114). Kern summarises this effect as follows:

From around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space. Technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation; independent cultural developments such as the stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, and the theory of relativity shaped consciousness directly. The result was a transformation of the dimensions of life and thought.

(1983:1-2)

¹³ For an in-depth discussion and historical overview of the notion of the independent existence of space in the light of philosophy and physics, see Graham Nerlich’s *The Shape of Space*, in which he argues that “space is an entity in its own right – a real live thing in our ontology” (1976:1). For more on the concept of space and its historical development through the ancient world, the Middle Ages and early modern times, see Michaela Ott’s article “Raum” (pp. 119-28), and the works of Sklar and Toretto, as cited in the bibliography.

Just one of these changes which took place, and which I deem relevant to my discussion of the spatiality of *The Master Builder*, is the development of the concept of “positive negative space”¹⁴ in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The easiest way to visualise negative space is to think of a traditional portrait picture. The subject would constitute positive space, while the background forms the negative space. Yet, during the last part of the nineteenth century, the traditional view of negative space as the emptiness in which “real” things exist began to give way to the recognition of its existence and functionality. This change in perception came about, according to Kern, for a number of different reasons, not least because of scientific advances which saw activity in what was previously seen as empty space. Hertz, for example, observed the oscillation of electromagnetic waves in a vacuum, and therefore developed the idea that *something* has to be responsible for it, that the emptiness cannot be nothing (Kern 1983:154). In the cultural realm negative space was for example used in surrealist poetry. In cubist painting, objects were not only depicted in a fractured way, as seen from different perspectives simultaneously (a very specific expression of the changing relationship between space and time), but the surrounding space became a subject of painting in its own right. This new conception of negative space is one in which I return again in my reading of the play.

a). A Norwegian example: The introduction of standard time

Giddens describes the invention and eventual mass production of the mechanical clock from the eighteenth century as instrumental in the separation of time and space (1990:17), which he in turn sees as one of the dominant sources of the dynamism of modernity (1990:53). In her dissertation *Da tiden ble normal: Innføring av fellestid i*

¹⁴ Kern uses this term to denote a positive attitude towards negative space (1983:153).

Norge på slutten av 1800-tallet, Marie Skoie details the process which culminated in the legal introduction of a common time for the whole of Norway. Before this law was put into practice, local solar time (setting clocks at noon at the moment when the sun reaches its zenith) was in use in Norway, which of course created many problems, because even over relatively short distances, there would be a difference in local time – the difference between the local times in Kristiania and Drammen, for instance, was four minutes under this system, and that between Kristiania and Bergen 22 minutes (2002:20-22). To further complicate matters, so-called “railway times” and “telegraph times” have been in use since the 1850s (Skoie 2002:3, 47-8 & 101). This system entailed the introduction of a common time on a stretch of railway, or for a part of a telegraph line, and Skoie describes the situation as follows:

På midten av 1800-tallet hadde også jernbanen i Norge en egen tid. Den tøffet seg gjennom et landskap med mange lokaltider. (...) Tid var et lokalt fenomen helt til 1895 da det ved lov ble innført en felles klokkeid for hele landet.

(2002:3)

The first attempt to introduce common time by law was unsuccessful in 1887, but, when the issue was brought before Stortinget again in 1894, it was accepted unanimously and the “*log om sams normaltid*” came into force on the 1st of January 1895 (2002:3).

b). Space and time: Separation or unification?

This separation of time from space is, however, as Giddens notes, dialectical in nature. The introduction of standard time disentangled the hitherto inextricable connection between place (a specific space) and time. Conversely, this meant that many different places now operated on the same time, which in effect served to unite them spatially. Giddens therefore describes something as simple as a railway

timetable as a “time-space ordering device” (1990:20), which in effect bring time and space together again. A consequence of the separation of time and space is the separation of place and space in modernity. When place is separated from space, “empty space” develops, which is comparable with the “empty time” that stems from the separation of time and space – just as this empty time is no longer connected to a specific locale, so empty space exists “without reference to a privileged locale” (Giddens 1990:19). Yet, as noted above in my discussion of the changing conception of negative space in the nineteenth century, empty space came to be seen as important in its own right. The separation of time and space (as well as that of space and place, in turn) is, according to Giddens, a “prime condition of the process of disembedding” (1990:20). Further, Giddens describes the separation of time and space as a distinctive feature of modern life, namely that of rationalised organisation (1990:20) and for the radical historicity associated with modernity, by which the past is appropriated through, amongst other things, a standardised dating system (1990:20-21).

1.2.3 Solness caught between two worlds?

Let us now briefly turn to *The Master Builder*, the main object of this thesis. Due to the play’s subject-matter and cultural-historical background, it has often been interpreted as the depiction of a man caught between two worlds, unable to properly come to terms with either the past or the present. This corresponds with Berman’s general description of the dichotomy between the modern and pre-modern which pervaded the time:

...the nineteenth-century modern public can remember what it is like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that are not modern at all. From this inner

dichotomy, this sense of living in two worlds simultaneously, the ideas of modernization and modernism emerge and unfold.

(1982:17)

Jameson hypothesises that “artistic or aesthetic ‘modernism’ essentially corresponds to a situation of incomplete modernization” (2002:114). In this sense, Solness seems indeed poised between two worlds – he is extremely afraid of the new generation that is waiting to take the place of his own, yet he can remember having brutally taken Knut Brovik’s place. Neither has Solness quite managed to become part of an expert system, which Giddens sees as a mechanism of the disembedding of social relations, in turn a fundamental component of modernity, as noted above. Even though he relies on something analogous to an expert system, namely the professional knowledge of the Broviks, he has not yet himself become completely professional, modern architect, but instead prefers the older title of master builder. This conflict between the modern and the pre-modern is especially seen in financial terms by Rønning in his interpretation of Solness as someone caught between two cultures, between an essentially pre-modern culture of myth and superstition and a modern one of commerce, commodity and markets: “More than anything he interprets his existence in pre-modern terms of supernatural fate, rather than in modern terms of socially created trust and risk” (Rønning 1994b:61). Rønning thus argues that *The Master Builder*:

may be comprehended as dealing with the profound insecurity experienced by individuals who lived through the modernising process, but construed it in concepts that had their origins in a society with strong remnants of traditionality.

(1994b:61)

Similarly, in line with his discussion of the juxtaposition between “sacred drama” and “avant-garde drama”, Erik Østerud remarks that at the end of *The Master Builder*:

Solness has engraved his mythical interpretation into his surroundings with a tremendous force. The onlookers, Aline, Ragnar Brovik, and Dr. Herdal, are completely mesmerized and become fossilized. From this moment on they cannot free themselves from the cosmic framework within which Solness has circumscribes their lives. From now on they are doomed to a being not in time, but in space, a being not in modernity but in antiquity.

(2002:68)

Østerud remarks that Ibsen houses a sacred “drama of myth and rituals” within a “drama of modernity” (2002:61). Owen sees this tension between the spiritual and secular as marking the post 1890-period as quintessentially modern (2001:74).¹⁵ Østerud’s view of the static nature in which the play ends, connects to Brynhildsvoll’s interpretation of Ibsen as spatial because of the curious nature in which time appears to congeal in his dramas, in which most of the characters are locked in a past which still determines their future:

Besonders im Spätwerk Ibsens führt die integrierte Desintegration von Zeit und Raum zur Bildung fremder, erstarrter Nahräume, die mit lebenden Toten bevölkert sind. Der seltsam statische Charakter dieser Räume erklärt sich dadurch, dass diese nicht aus dem direkten, gelebten Zeitbezug entstehen, sondern sich erst allmählich aus den Versatzstücken erzählter Vergangenheit konstituieren.

(1993:33)

Frank sees this static quality as something inherently modern, because in modern literature, “time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out” (1991:63). He continues to argue that “past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity

¹⁵ Likewise Jameson describes the emergence of modernism in the West in the light of Max Weber’s concept of *Entzauberung* or disenchantment, because during this period “the catastrophe of modernity...dashes traditional structures and lifeways to pieces, sweeps away the sacred, undermines immemorial habits and inherited languages, and leaves the world to be reconstructed rationally and in the service of profit and commerce, and to be manipulated and exploited in the form of industrial capitalism. What happens in the West to the existential...can most instructively be observed in the realm of time, which on the one hand is seized upon in its measurability (the working day, that struggle within the factory for possession of the chronometer or timepiece itself...), and on the other becomes the deep bottomless vegetative time of Being itself, no longer draped and covered with myth or inherited religion (1994:84).

which, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition” (*loc. cit.*). Yet, as I have argued above, despite the static quality of art in which the “distinctions between past and present are wiped out”, language retains a sequential, temporal component in order to convey meaning.

The most convincing argument for seeing Solness as someone threatened by a new world is perhaps that he seems to see himself in this light:

SOLNESS. Så vilde de la' Ragnar bygge hjemmet for sig?

BROVIK. De likte så svært godt det, som han vilde ha' frem. De syntes, det var noget så aldeles nyt, dette her, sa' de.

SOLNESS. Åhå! Nyt! Ikke slik noget gammeldags juks, som det, jeg plejer bygge!

BROVIK. De syntes, det var noget andet.

(XII, p. 38)

In the next chapter I look more closely at the way in which Solness's words are always in doubt, which would imply that this exchange could merely be the result of his casting himself in the role of the victimised party. Yet, that said, the idea of a conflict between old and new is here raised in no uncertain terms. Still, Solness's description of the new house he is building with its high tower appears to indicate something in the Jugendstil vein, which would place Solness at the forefront of architectural development and trends. This strange contrast between what is perceived as modern and what as old-fashioned seems rather important to me. Solness's perception of himself as old-fashioned also finds expression in the fear Solness has for the younger generation (as far as this generation is represented by Ragnar, at least). Similarly, despite all of his seemingly very modern ideas, such as preferring to build homes for people rather than churches, Solness seems right until the end of the play to fear the retribution of the Christian God for this choice. This seems symptomatic of the way in which he belongs both to a modern and pre-modern

world – he has the courage to deny the authority such a God represents, yet do not discount the possibility that a reprisal may be due.

In my reading of the play I attempt to show how the conflicts between old and new, sacred and secular, traditional and innovative, past, present and future find expression in spatial terms in *The Master Builder*.

Chapter 2

The setting and performance space of *The Master Builder*

We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.

— Winston Churchill¹

The play-as-text can be performed *in* a space, but the play-as-event belongs to the space, and makes the space perform as much as it makes the actors perform.

— David Wiles²

In this chapter I look at the setting of *The Master Builder* and the way in which this setting contributes to the performance space of the play, using mostly Gay McAuley's terminology as set out in the introduction. In the following chapter I extend this discussion of the setting (the current home of Halvard Solness and his wife, Aline) to a discussion of the importance of the different houses and buildings which feature in the play. The buildings of the play are not only important regarding its thematics, but it also facilitates the performance space and provides much of the impetus for the dialogue. A further adjunct to this is the question of the meta-dramatic nature of the play, and the way in which this is encouraged by its setting and performance space. Yet, before commencing this discussion, I take a slight detour to discuss something I see as absolutely central in shaping any understanding of the play, namely the ways in which the play does not conform to conventional realism.

¹ From a speech delivered to the House of Commons on the 28th of October 1943, taken from *Never Give In!: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), pp. 358-61.

² From *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 1.

2.1 Undermining realism

2.1.1 The house on stage

The nineteenth-century theatre was strongly influenced by technical innovations and by the concept of the “well-made play”, as first popularised by the prolific French playwright, Eugène Scribe (1791-1861). The well-made play is essentially a formula emphasising a careful exposition and preparation, an arrangement of incidents according to the principle of cause-and-effect, the building of tension leading to a climax by the manipulation of withheld information, sudden reversals and the use of suspense (Brockett 1999:379-80). Both these factors can in a way be seen as consequences of modernity. The technological innovations took place in the spirit of the Industrial Revolution and the major advances in technical expertise it brought, while Scribe’s emphasis on plausibility and causality can likewise be said to be a consequence of the meticulously sober reasoning of the Enlightenment. Theatres increasingly tended to conform to the stage set-up favoured by Scribe for the staging of the well-made play, which developed in the ubiquitous box-stage, while new lighting techniques, especially the use of gaslight and limelight, enabled subtler and more realistic acting styles, since gaslight was closer to natural daylight (Booth 1995:302-3; Innes 2000:10). Because of the experience he earned working at the theatres of Bergen and Christiania (1851-1863), Ibsen understood the conventions of the stage well and, incidentally, also staged several of Scribe’s pieces while working in the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (Innes 2000:7). Jon Nygaard emphasises that Ibsen did not radically transform this stage set-up as already set in place by his predecessors, but did revolutionise that which was presented on the stage (1992:170). Ibsen made a more realistic portrayal on stage possible by doing away with asides and

soliloquies and by motivating the uncovering of secrets and other information in realistic ways, thus refining Scribe's popular conventions even further in the interest of a realistic portrayal on stage (Brockett 1999:426). Although realistic theatre is now often seen as old-fashioned (it has, after all now been common for more than a century and a half, and not least because of the influence of Ibsen), Innes stresses the fact that the start of naturalist theatre "was as much an aesthetic revolt as a moral or social revolution" (2000:8), since it aspired to replace trivial subject-matter with the social realities of life.

In Ibsen's modern prose dramas (the twelve plays from *Pillars of Society* (1877) to *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)) he uses the framework developed with the conventional box-stage as a structural element (Nygaard 1992:170). This stage set-up becomes a necessity in the staging of his plays, rather than a restriction imposed on the action by practical concerns.³ Nygaard emphasises that "the modern box-stage was the ideal frame to symbolize and distinguish modern individuals in the modern situation: they have retreated and have shut themselves off from the complicated world out there" (1997:85) and additionally emphasises that Ibsen did not try to give an accurate representation of the cluttered bourgeois home of his time⁴ on stage, but instead emptied the stage and concentrated on a few people and positions (1992:168,170).⁵ Yet, especially in his last four plays, i.e. *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken*

³ Brustein holds that "Ibsen embraces these scenic limitations for the sake of establishing a deceptive surface, which he hoped to penetrate through revelation and exposure" (1980:125), while Williams notes that even though Ibsen's plays may have made the audiences of their day uncomfortable, "aesthetically his works remained within the range of conventional thinking about theatre." (1994:172)

⁴ Kern observes that with "the flood of industrial goods in the nineteenth century, Europeans lost their sense of the dignity of space and rooms were cluttered with knickknacks and mementos, bird cages and aquariums, ornate picture frames, moldings, drapes, and overstuffed furniture. Large interior spaces were thought to be a sign of incompleteness or poverty (1983:156).

⁵ Brian Johnston remarks that "it is precisely this selectivity and sparseness in the use of 'props' that gives the dramas' details such metaphoric power" (1989:43).

(1899), Ibsen decidedly begins to leave the realistic drama behind, for something that is increasingly more fantastical or “symbolic”. These last four plays are often regarded as a whole when subdividing Ibsen’s modern prose plays into groups. This is partly because *The Master Builder* is the first play Ibsen wrote in Norway, after returning from his self-imposed exile of 27 years. A historically perhaps even greater factor in this grouping may have been Ibsen’s often cited view of his four last plays as forming a series.⁶ However, chronology and biography are not the only reasons for the propensity to group these plays together. In “The Last Plays”, Inga-Stina Ewbank describes these four plays as also “clearly hav[ing] thematic concerns and formal and stylistic features in common” (1994:127). She continues to characterise them as being “very much of their time, products of a decade in European literary and dramatic history which saw the flourishing of Symbolist theatre and the beginnings of Modernism” especially “in their preoccupations – with the alienated artist, with the amorality of the creative impulse, with strange and mysterious areas of human consciousness – and in their challenge to the conventions of realistic, bourgeois theatre” (*loc. cit.*). The last four plays are also grouped together by Brian Johnston in *The Ibsen Cycle*, who sees the characters of the last four plays as living at “an altogether higher level of consciousness and reflection” and as being “animated by and lured toward possibilities quite outside the categories of the earlier plays” (1975:134). McFarlane, however, prefers grouping *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *The Master Builder* (1892) together, saying “they clearly have much in common; much of what they do have in common represents a new departure” and that “the domination of the *mind*, and not merely the determination of conduct” is their main preoccupation (1989:273, orig. emphasis).

⁶ From a letter written to Moritz Prozor, Ibsen’s French translator, on the 5th of March 1900 (XVIII, p. 447).

One element of this “new departure” which can clearly be observed in *The Master Builder* is the marked divergence from realism in the play. Helland notes that the entire realistic opening of the play does not fulfil the traditional role of an exposition, since it mainly introduces themes that are peripheral to the play as a whole (1997:77 *et seqq.*). Hornby takes this further, by postulating that this is, in effect, a deconstruction of realism since Ibsen first uses “conventions that would have been familiar to late nineteenth-century audiences” but then “moves into his hero’s mind, to an inner world of unconscious desires and exotic symbolism” (1983:30).⁷ One interesting detail regarding the modern prose plays is that the first eight plays, from *Pillars of Society* to *Hedda Gabler* are set inside, with most of the scenes set in private houses and some in offices. The only exception here is of course *The Lady from the Sea*, which is set outside and very much a play which stands apart from the others (it also has a potentially more hopeful ending, for instance). Yet, the last scene of *The Master Builder* is set outside, on the veranda of the Solness home. And most scenes of the three following plays are also set outside, with the exception of *John Gabriel Borkman*, which nevertheless ends in the famous outdoors death scene. I think *The Master Builder* therefore, in a way, marks the beginning of a transition in Ibsen’s corpus as a whole, and I indicate this in my argument in this chapter by arguing that a certain progression takes place in the settings of its three acts. Astrid Sæther describes this movement in Ibsen as follows:

...from the inner space of the living room cracks start to appear; there are openings to the external world.... This “cracking” is extended, and the movement in the direction of the “open room” becomes complete in Ibsen’s final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, in which the action in its entirety is set in the park and the open air.

(1998:147)

⁷ Similarly, Johnston argues that “much of the symbolic power of Ibsen’s scene comes from the fact that it is being dialectically subverted, undermined, destroyed from the beginning” (1989:45).

This move away from realism and the closed box-stage, which is not taken any further than a transition from inside to outside in *The Master Builder* as regards setting, does however take place in remarkable ways regarding the characters and dialogue of the play. The opening scene, with Solness's three downtrodden employees, appears to serve the usual realistic fare. Dr. Herdal also seems to come from the familiar stock of Ibsenian characters. In fact, the only character who right from the start has a slightly unreal appearance (not so much in the sense of unrealistic, as in the sense of spectral, however) is Aline. Yet, in the conversations, especially those between Hilde and Solness, and Aline and Hilde, but also in the earlier one where Solness discusses the way in which he came to employ Kaja with Dr. Herdal, the normal logic of cause-and-effect, which is so central to the truly realistic drama, is completely subverted.⁸ Moreover, as I discuss in the next section, Solness completely undermines his own credibility as a character, thus discrediting any reading of the play which does not take into account the fact that his words may not be accepted at face value.

2.1.2 *The (un)importance of words*

In a play, of course, one only *knows* what is said or done on stage during the short time of a performance. The rest must be *inferred*. This is more acutely the case with drama than with the novel, for instance, in which some narrator is usually involved and gives added insight into the characters and their actions (however one-sided that may be). In the case of Ibsen's plays, this problem is further compounded by the fact that so little action results from events taking place in the play itself. As a result most of the modern plays, and especially the ones after *A Doll's House*, have a markedly

⁸ This is explored in some detail by Robert Brustein in "Theatre in the Age of Einstein: The Crack in the Chimney" (1978), here taken from *Critical Moments* (1980).

static quality. As noted above, most of the scenes are set inside. Many of these scenes are additionally dominated by seemingly endless conversation and a minimum of action, and *The Master Builder* is a case in point.⁹ This has, in my view, two important consequences. Firstly, because there is in general so little action, all the action which does take place immediately becomes more meaningful. If a character, for instance, suddenly gets up out of the drawing room chair in which he/she has been sitting, having a relatively quiet conversation (normally about past events) with another character, that action has much more meaning than if the characters have been moving around on stage the whole time. This means that particular attention has to be paid to Ibsen's stage directions, which are with very good reason so meticulous. Secondly, exactly because there is so little action to guide any interpretation of the Ibsenian play, the importance of the dialogue is further increased.¹⁰

I examine the spatial implications of the stage directions and the dialogue I examine extensively in the following section on the performance space of *The Master Builder*. Now, however, I want to place the focus on a single utterance by the protagonist right at the outset of the play, which in my view has not been afforded enough attention in most of the criticism of the play.¹¹ This is of course when Solness tells Brovik, "Å, hør aldrig på, hvad jeg så'n — siger" (XII, p. 37). When the protagonist so unequivocally denies his own credibility, the reader is immediately faced with a dilemma. Any possible interpretation of the play is thus rendered much more

⁹ Nygaard asserts that "Ibsen's characters are not acting, but remembering what they have done once upon a time" (1997:95).

¹⁰ Lis Møller describes the prose plays as "appear[ing] to possess a characteristic semiotic density, where every detail, even the seemingly most trivial, has a function in relation to the work as a whole" (2001:7).

¹¹ A notable exception in this regard is Helland, "'Play Within the Play' – Meta-drama and Modernity in *The Master Builder*" where he describes it as a way in which "the text for the first time poses its own problem of interpretation" (1994:315). Cf. also his analysis in *Melankoliens Spill* (1997:83 *et seq.*).

ambivalent than would otherwise have been the case. Just to complicate matters further, Solness and Brovik had the following exchange just a few lines before:

BROVIK (rejser sig). Er det Deres alvorlige mening?

SOLNESS (mut). Ja det er. — For en gangs skyld.

(XII, p. 35)

With this still fresh in the mind of the reader, Solness goes on to declare that he *never* should be believed. In my view, the rapid succession of these two utterances can elicit two responses. On the one hand, the mere fact that Old Brovik feels the need to ask Solness if he is serious, may indicate that he has indeed not always kept his word in the past. Solness's reply here – that he should be believed “for once” (p. 787) appears to confirm this. The culminating effect is that, to be on the safe side, one should rather *never* believe what Solness says. On the other hand, as Solness's “sullen” (*loc. cit.*) reply here indicates, his words have to be taken at face value, at least sometimes, because otherwise it would become quite impossible to have any meaningful interaction with him. The question that is raised, then, is if Solness should be believed, for once, when he says that he never should be believed, or if he should in fact never be believed, also not when he says “Oh, don't listen to what I — say” (p. 789).¹² Either way, the reliability of Solness's voice is cast in a doubtful light for the rest of the play. This leaves the reader or the audience, as his employees, in an impossible predicament. Yet, despite (or perhaps *because* of) Solness's insistence that what he says cannot be believed, he seems rather intent on pointing out that people do not understand him. In the first act, he tells Knut Brovik, “That's not what I mean. Lord — don't you understand me either?” (p. 787) and Kaja Fosli “Oh, you don't see what I mean either” (p. 793). In fact, the expression of misunderstanding occurs quite frequently throughout the play, and not just when Solness accuses others

¹² Incidentally, by choosing not to translate the word “aldrig”, Fjelde's translation softens the blow of Solness's second statement considerably.

of not understanding him. Solness often seems to truly perplex the other characters with his motivations and conclusions. When he tells Dr. Herdal of the “beneficial self-torment” he feels at letting Aline think that he is having an affair with Kaja, the doctor reiterates his incomprehension:

DOKTOR HERDAL (ryster på hodet). Dette her forstår jeg ikke det guds skabte ord af.

(...)

Nej, ved gud, om jeg forstår et ord —

(...)

(noget ærgelig.) På glid? Det skønner jeg heller ikke et gran af, herr Solness.

(XII, p. 49)

Likewise, in the second act, when Solness tells Hilde how the fire had nothing to do with his failure to repair the chimney of the old house, she asks him to only talk sense (p. 830). By these constant reminders in the text of its own incomprehensibility, realism is further undermined. The only conclusion that could conceivably be drawn is that everything Solness says should be taken with a pinch of salt. In the light of this, Solness’s insistence on being unable to change, appears merely another convenient falsehood,

SOLNESS (går efter ham, halvt fortvilet). Ja, for jeg kan ikke andet, skønner De! Jeg er

nu engang slig, som jeg er! Og jeg kan da ikke skabe meg om heller!

BROVIK. Nej, nej, — De kan vel ikke det. (...)

(XII, p. 39)

Subsequently he constantly changes, by for instance accepting what Hilde remembers as the true version of events, or as least as what he may have wished at the time. Memories form a vital part of identity, and by so lightly accepting things that he cannot remember having happened even in thought as the truth, Solness seems not too averse to change himself, if and when it suits him. In this respect, it is also interesting to note Hilde’s demand of the fulfilment a promise Solness had made ten years ago to her at Lysanger. If Solness did indeed make this promise and did what she says he

did, his denial would be perfectly in character. Yet, he seems genuinely mystified at first, until he devises a ground for Hilde's story, namely that he "must have willed it. Wished it. Desired it...So [he] *did* the thing too!" (p.807). This seems to indicate that Hilde is much better at fantasising, or making up stories than Solness is – and what is more, she demands to be taken seriously, while he in effect demands not to be. This also underlies the fundamental paradox of Hilde's character – she is both very "real" with her hiking clothes and dirty underwear, and completely unreal and immersed in fantasy.

Something else that deserves brief comment is the brief hesitation indicated before Solness says "siger". Its rhetorical function is to emphasise the following word, i.e. "siger". The significance of this can be merely straightforward emphasis, but in my view it also carries the implication that what is left *unsaid* could well be as or more important or reliable (or, conversely, in the light of my argument above, unreliable) as that which *is* said. To me this remark appears to introduce a series of events in which characters embrace the opposite of what is said, seen, or implied.¹³ Examples of this abound in the play. I find this especially intriguing in the light of Solness's presentation of himself as mad, in which he appears to draw conclusions more on the basis of what has *not* been said by anyone, than on what the other characters may have insinuated about his sanity. In fact, Solness shows a propensity for endowing silences with meaning, for providing causes, however implausible, for things others

¹³ At this point the emergence of a new understanding of negative space which took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century (briefly described in the previous chapter) should perhaps be recalled, since it in a similar way drew attention to that which cannot be seen. Giving attention to what *cannot be seen* is certainly not exclusively a preoccupation of modernity – it is inherent in folk-beliefs, religion, myth and superstition of all sorts. Yet, during modernity, new ways of measuring and seeing that which has hitherto been invisible were actively pursued in various fields. Wilhelm Röntgen's discovery that the human skeleton could be made visible by the use of x-rays in 1895 is a case in point. As is the emphasis placed on the unconscious in psychoanalysis, perhaps the most conspicuously modern discipline.

would see as mere coincidences. Aline employs the same strategy, but in connection with sight, when she enters the room to find Solness alone with Kaja, whom she evidently already dislikes and suspects:

FRU SOLNESS (med et blik på Kaja). Jeg kommer nok til ulejlighed, jeg, kan jeg skønne.

SOLNESS. Aldeles ikke. Frøken Fosli har bare et lidet brev at skrive.

FRU SOLNESS. Ja, jeg ser det.

(XII, p. 41)

In the same vein, Solness later admits to remembering something he perhaps may not have done, and Aline admits to grieve for her lost possessions and dolls, not her children. The most unsettling example of this however occurs in the final scene of the play, when Hilde ecstatically celebrates Solness's ascent of the tower, after he has fallen to his death. In the light of this I think that interpreting Solness's words both as an emphasis on the importance of that which is unsaid or implied (and, by extension *unseen* or imagined), and as a clear warning against the literal or unambiguous interpretation of anything he says. Above all, however, by casting doubt over his own words Solness reveals just how thin the façade of reality in *The Master Builder* is.

2.2 The performance space in the text of *The Master Builder*

2.2.1 *Text vs. performance*

In this section I discuss the performance space of *The Master Builder*, especially in the light of the theoretical background provided by Gay McAuley's *Space in Performance* (1999), as described in the introduction. In her detailed study of the notion and manifestation of performance space, McAuley does not afford the dramatic text as much importance as literary scholars perhaps would like. She criticises the way in which theatre semioticians have attempted to "read" a performance as if it

were a text, since “reading implies both a controlled linear process (scanning the page form left to right, top to bottom, word following word from first to last) and a cerebral connection between reader and text that are misleading in relation to the theatrical event” (1999:7). Her emphasis is on the unique, ephemeral performance event, which she sees as consisting of the interaction between spectators and performance in a specific space (1999:5). Yet, although she does not view the dramatic text as the lone linchpin round which the wheel of the theatrical performance revolves, McAuley views the text as an important, but not the only, source of spatiality, since “even a text with minimal stage directions contains a great deal of spatial information in the dialogue and in the basic organization of plot and dramatic action” (1999:222) and as a consequence, as noted in the introduction, she views the spatial information contained in the texts as important in conveying meaning. Here I concentrate on the play in text form, however. Yet, this does not mean that McAuley’s notions about performance space are irrelevant. In fact, I think they are quite significant to a discussion of the spatial nature of the play, not just to see how the outer and inner space of *The Master Builder* interact and manifest in each other, but also because of the meta-dramatic nature of so much of the play. Due to my focus on the text I do not venture to discuss the performance details of single productions of this text on the stage, or their reception, but analyse the nature of the spatiality of the text as it pertains to performance *within* the text rather than on a stage, since “playwriting is a particular form of writing...designed to generate a spatial practice” (McAuley 1999:219).

Yet, the fact that the text in question is a play inevitably evokes the theatre in the mind of the reader. The theatre building itself, while perhaps not quite a house in the

everyday sense of the word, is also a very specific and very conventional type of building, housing a type of art which is extraordinarily conventional in its own right. Though these conventions may change with time (and indeed have done so), many of them have proven surprisingly long-lasting.¹⁴ McAuley emphasises that the theatre building or place of performance itself “provides a context of interpretation for spectators and performers alike” (1999:41).¹⁵ Likewise, in my view the genre of *The Master Builder*, the very fact that it is written as a drama and not as a novel or poem, gives the reader a certain context in which to place it (theatre and performance). Further, the text in question is, as the text of a play, in McAuley’s words, “designed to create a spatial practice”.

McAuley repeatedly argues for the constant tension between the fictional and the physical when watching a performance. No matter how involved the spectators may be in the fictional reality presented on stage, they are also similarly aware of the fact that this reality is merely fictional, and they are constantly reminded of this by the presence of their fellow spectators and the conventions of the theatre. This leads McAuley to suggest “denegation” as an apt term to describe the theatrical experience with, since

spectators in the theatre both believe and disbelieve, they play a game in which they permit themselves to believe to a certain extent what is occurring, they can even be moved to tears by this, but at the same time they know that it is not real, or, rather, that it is both not real (a fiction) and real.

(1999:39-40)

¹⁴ For an exploration of the architecture of the theatre buildings themselves, see, for example, Ian Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).

¹⁵ McAuley notes the step-by-step nature of the entering into a theatre (there are usually first imposing entrances to the building that must be negotiated, then tickets that have to be bought and verified and only after these things have been done may the spectator find the correct seat in the auditorium): “the spectator has been progressively further and further removed from the world outside, permitted to move further and further into the world within” and observes that certain conventions tend to precede (the opening of the curtain or dimming of lights) and follow (lowering of the curtain, lighting of the auditorium) the play itself, as if to stress the fact that the performance only lasts for a certain, clearly designated amount of time, after which life must return to normal (1999:43).

Likewise I think it may be argued that one is always aware of the conventions of the dramatic genre when reading the text. The very typesetting constantly reminds one that this is a dramatic text, with the names of the characters, and stage directions counteracting any illusion that the fictional world is real. Further, this leads to a certain doubling of the spatiality of the text: just as the stage is always in some way present in the view of the spectators, confirming that the performance is just that and not “real” in the ordinary sense of the word (the stage space in McAuley’s terminology), so the reader is continually aware, because of the conventions employed in writing a drama, of its genre. And, as I have argued throughout, this genre is inherently spatial in nature. This means that the theatre audience watches *real* actors performing *fictional* events in the *real* space of the theatre. In my discussion I focus on this doubling effect of the spatiality – simultaneous *fictionality* and *reality* – as it is manifested in the text itself, where characters are continuously watching the performances of other characters. Additionally the reader inevitably imagines all of this as set in the theatre, which adds another layer of perception to the already intricate web of seeing and being seen, of not seeing the apparent and seeing the invisible.

Moreover, there are many similarities between Ibsen’s dramas and the modern novel. His descriptions of settings are rather detailed, compared to that of many other dramatists.¹⁶ Jon Nygaard observes in this regard, “from being few, short and rather scanty in his early plays, his stage directions swelled to become long and detailed texts in his modern dramas” (1997:95). The meticulousness of these descriptions may

¹⁶ In Shakespeare, for instance, stage descriptions are kept to the bare minimum and most of the stage directions are implicit, rather than explicit. Even in some other modern playwrights, like Chekhov, the descriptions of the settings seem sparse compared to that of Ibsen. There are of course exceptions, with especially dramatists like Shaw and O’Neill, who were both, incidentally, greatly influenced by Ibsen, showing a propensity for long, detailed stage descriptions.

be one of the reasons why Ibsen's plays are so eagerly *read*, and why the emphasis on the texts of his dramas has been so great. In her book *Norges teaterhistorie*, Lise Lyche emphasises the intimate knowledge of the workings of the stage that is revealed in Ibsen's executable stage directions, and she continues to argue that the very completeness of these stage directions might have been responsible for restricting later productions of his work to the realistic mould for so long (1991:64). The similarity to the novel is especially evident in his detailed descriptions of the characters' physical appearances. The description of Knut Brovik at the start of *The Master Builder*, for instance, may as easily have come from the pages of a novel: "KNUT BROVIK is a gaunt old man with white hair and beard. He wears a rather threadbare but well-preserved black coat, glasses, and a white muffler somewhat yellowed by age" (p. 785). I think these novelistic elements of his dramas function in more than one way. On the one hand, it enables one to approach the play as a text, rather than as a performance. An interesting adjunct to the novelistic elements of Ibsen's drama in general, which I think pertinent to this reading of *The Master Builder* is the different spatial layers that may develop due to the use of different perspectives or narrative techniques in a novel, as described by Brynhildsvoll (1993:39 *et seqq.*). These are of course usually limited by the generic constraints when a truly realistic drama is concerned. Yet, as I argue throughout, *The Master Builder* is not a realistic drama at all, in the strict sense of the concept, even though it is cast in the mould of the realistic Ibsenian drama, as regards its characters and setting. The "truth" of the recounted memories is continually in doubt, as is the sincerity of everything Solness says, and, to complicate matters, most of the characters are continually playing different roles. Nothing is therefore quite as it seems. With so many possible versions of "truth" presented in the play, one could

almost describe it as the type of novelistic perspectivity Brynhildsvoll refers to in his study of the spatiality of literature. Jon Nygaard, for instance, advances the argument that Ibsen's plays have completely departed from the theatre and entered into the realm of literature. He notes that through his specific dramatic technique, which no longer involves the audience in performance, but instead presents them with a given situation on stage which they merely *observe*, Ibsen is

closing the theatre and turning the theatre into literature. (...) [Ibsen] insisted on writing books for readers, not scripts for the theatre. Even if he adopted most of the conventions in the theatre of his times, Ibsen's dramas are literature, not theatre. His dramas are literary texts pretending to be, and by many misunderstood or misinterpreted to be, theatre. His dramatic texts are literary descriptions of actions taking place within the frame or limitation of the closed box-stage, they have therefore also to be interpreted as literary texts and not as physical actions played on the stage.

(1997:97)

Nygaard argues that since Ibsen began to lock out the audience from the theatrical experience, the "theatricality of the theatre of the stage is replaced by the 'theatricality' within the text. The theatre within the theatre or the play within the play is therefore the actual play in Ibsen's modern drama" (1997:97).¹⁷ In my reading of the performance space of *The Master Builder*, I work from the point of view of the play as a text, as noted above. Yet, I do try to keep in mind that the text is *written as a play*, which has very specific spatial implications, even if it is read, rather than performed. I think however literary the text may be in nature, it inevitably invokes the theatre, and therefore the stage cannot be completely left out of the discussion. As such, terminology and concepts which originated in the field of performance studies seem relevant in discussing the written text, both because of its theatrical nature and because it has inextricable links with the theatre.

¹⁷ Similarly, Williams argues that since Ibsen's plays were "not especially pleasant" and "no longer staged solely for entertainment" a "new dimension to theatregoing"; a "novel and potentially antagonistic relationship...between stage and auditorium" was created (1994:172).

One of the main differences between literary art and the theatre lies in the ephemeral quality of the performance and the relative permanence of a text. Although this may hamper the discussion of performance slightly, Peter Brook makes the point that it also lends the theatre a quality that is absent from the written word and life itself, namely the opportunity for second chances and new beginnings, because, “in the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time” (1968:140). In *The Master Builder* a similar ephemeral quality exists, which in my view, as I argue more fully in subsequent chapters, is the result of the pervading presence of fantasy and dreams, and the element of repetition in the text. The constant tension which exists between the fictionality of what is acted out on stage and the reality of the presence of the actors onstage, as recounted above, takes on a special character in the text of *The Master Builder*, especially because of the prevalence of meta-dramatic elements. An adjunct to this, as I have argued above, is the way in which a very realistic setting is used to accommodate a fiction which has in many ways departed so far from the conventions of realism.

I now turn the discussion to the setting of the play, as specified in Ibsen’s text and the way in which this setting functions in facilitating the action. McAuley emphasises that the setting remains merely an unimportant background to the action unless it is incorporated into the performance. She stresses, “the act of looking...is extremely important in terms of the actor’s exploitation of space, for in the theatre a look is very much a spatial act” since it gives the person or object that is looked at a presence in the same space as the person that is looking, and makes a connection between them (McAuley 1999:114). In his study of the stage directions in Ibsen’s prose dramas, John Northam emphasises that “visual suggestion by itself can only supplement

dialogue as a means of portraying complex personality” (1953:12). In this reading I take this slightly further. Not by arguing that the visual (or, to stick to my terminology, the *spatial*) takes precedence over the *verbal* in *The Master Builder*, but by showing how the verbal is spatialised, since all words in a drama are articulated by characters somehow located in space.¹⁸ This is more obvious when seeing the play as a theatre performance, but is nevertheless no less true of the play as text, because the reader reads the stage directions whilst reading the dialogue. I think the overt nature of stage directions in the written text (usually made especially obvious on the basis of the differences in type and because they “interrupt” the dialogue) makes some degree of spatialisation of the dialogue inevitable. In this I follow McAuley’s assertion that words are “necessarily located physically within the performance space” “by virtue of being spoken, and even offstage, amplified or recorded voices tend to acquire some spatial location” and that this contributes to the meaning conveyed (1999:210-11). As modern and postmodern theatre productions have repeatedly shown, setting is not essential to the creating of the fictional place on stage. The stage can be completely void of décor or scenery and still convincingly convey the fictional place. Yet, within the realistic convention in which Ibsen is writing *The Master Builder* (the convention remains realistic, especially as regards the outer details, even if the play departs from realism in many other ways), setting is still seen as quite important in the creation of the fictional place presented onstage, as well as in facilitating the location of the offstage space. Here I attempt to show how these elements of performance in the text facilitate the spatiality of *The Master Builder* and the resulting attitudes to space (in Brynhildsvoll’s terminology). In discussing the settings of the different acts I look at the settings as described in the text, and then find some examples of how this setting

¹⁸McAuley extends this to arguing that language is inherently spatial in nature, as manifested in our propensity for using language in spatial and bodily metaphors, which means that “thought becomes spatialized in the very process of talking” (1999:218).

facilitates the action, or contributes to the performance space by way of some examples from the text. Another way in which spatiality is facilitated by the text is through the stage directions. McAuley distinguishes two types of extra-dialogic stage directions: on a primary level, these indicate the entrances and exits of characters, and on a secondary level they indicate movement within the presentational space and further, a range of implicit and explicit intra-dialogic indications are made in the text (1999:224-5). For the sake of avoiding unnecessary clumsiness, I do not always refer to “the reader or the audience” in my discussion, preferring to use just “the reader” when it is meant in a general way, unless a clear distinction needs to be made between them. I trust, however, that the difference between general and specific usage in this regard will be apparent in context. In this discussion I look in slightly more detail at the first act than at the second and third, from which I only discuss a few selected examples. This was mainly done to avoid a certain amount of repetition.

2.2.2 The first act

The setting of the first act inevitably sets the tone for the play as the whole, and is the first impression the audience gets of the fictional world presented on stage, or, in the case of the reader, the first impression of the physical reality of the fictional world in which the text is set. Here, the first impression which the setting gives is that one is dealing with the familiar indoors set-up of an Ibsenian prose drama. Northam describes the set of the first act of *The Master Builder* as “unusually poor in symbolic significance” (1953:173). I do not fully agree with this assertion, as will become clear in the rest of the discussion, although I focus on the functionality of the setting, rather than on its symbolic value. As I have mentioned above, and argue throughout the thesis, *The Master Builder*, whilst conforming in some ways to the realistic drama

about bourgeois society, also breaks away from this tradition in a number of significant ways. Therefore the impression created by the setting of the first act serves as much as a contrast to the action as a complement. The spectators or readers are lured into thinking that they know how the play works before it starts, imagining its theme to a variation on the ones they have encountered in “closed room” dramas before, and thus the play, as it unfolds, proves to be even more puzzling and startling than it would have been had a completely unconventional setting being chosen. This is not to say that the setting is not fitting for the subject-matter. On the contrary, it is the incongruity between the setting and the action (or, more to the point, the recounted memories and future plans) which provides much of the subsequent uncanny tension of the play. As Northam notes, “there is nothing much here, except perhaps the plainness of the room, to suggest much to an audience” (*loc. cit.*). Again, this works on two levels. On the one hand, the barrenness of the room seems an adequate reflection of the futility of the lives led by the people who work there. The description of the physical appearances of the three employees is not only novelistic in the naturalist tradition, as I have noted above, but also seems to connect to the appearance of the room. Williams, incidentally, views “interaction between character and environment” as a critical dimension of Ibsen’s drama, which demanded that his contemporaneous stage directors pay more attention to detailed settings (1994:172-3). Here, Knut Brovik is clearly ill, and suffers a probably fatal stroke later in the play, Ragnar has a stoop, which clearly reflects his thwarted ambition at the hands of Solness and Kaja, who is described as “delicate” (p. 785), later appears to be devoted to an illusion. Although Solness does appear vigorous compared to his employees, as the play unfolds, it becomes clear that his hope of building “snug, cozy, sunlit homes, where a father and mother and a whole drove of children could live safe and happy”

(p. 825) has come to nothing. Yet, on the other hand, this seemingly dull room is also the room in which Ragnar has designed the plans which may set him on the path to become a builder in his own right, the room into which Hilde first enters to recount the events she remembers from ten years ago, and the room in which we learn of Solness's ability to call on the "helpers and servers" (p. 830), even if it is not put into exactly these terms in the first act. Placing something extraordinary in a seemingly very ordinary setting puts its extraordinariness in much sharper relief than otherwise possible, and this is as much the case in the two other acts as in this one.

The first act is set in Solness's office, which is located in his house. The fact that Solness has his office in his house is often commented upon by critics, who tend to link this to the contentious relationship between the private and public spheres in modernity.¹⁹ This fact is pointed out to a reader in the very first sentence of the play. Yet, unless somehow explicitly made obvious during a production of the play, it is only quite a bit later in the act, when Mrs. Solness enters to ask her husband if he wants to greet the doctor, that a (first-time) theatre audience would know the workroom is part of their house. This is but a single example of how different the play is experienced in reading and performance, and how one's impression and consequent interpretation of the action are shaped by minute details. One implication of this difference between what the reader knows from the very outset about the world of the play and what the audience probably learns only a bit later is that Solness immediately has a little more authority at the start of the play in the eyes of a reader than in the view of the audience – he is not only the boss, but this is also his *house* – which makes his careful entrance even more curious and his adulterous game with

¹⁹ Astrid Sæther, for instance, says this location "expresses the problematic relationship between the private and public sectors" (1998:155).

Kaja (even if it turns out to be playacting on various levels) even more audacious, since he is literally doing this with his wife literally in the next room. Conversely, to the audience this at first appears as an office scene. Therefore, in the case of the audience the initial impression created by the setting is undermined in a slightly different way and sequence than it is for the reader. There are of course also workrooms situated in the houses of several other homes in Ibsen's prose plays; for instance, the photographic studio in the Ekdal home or Helmer's offstage study in *A Doll's House*.²⁰

The most obvious reason for having Solness's workroom in his house is, of course, that it facilitates the action of the first act. As noted already, it enables Mrs. Solness to be present in the next room in the mind of the reader whilst Solness is apparently having an affair with his bookkeeper. This makes Mrs. Solness's veiled references to knowledge of such an affair more pertinent and gives a shade of dramatic irony to her suspicions. This is in turn revealed to be doubly ironic if Solness may be believed when he tells how he "feel[s] that there's almost a kind of beneficial self-torment in letting Aline do [him] an injustice" (p. 798). The room also functions as mimetic presentation of the origin of some of the recurrent images of the play – this is where plans of houses are drafted, with all the foundations, chimneys and towers which are repeatedly evoked in the dialogue. The workroom and its appearance also exacerbate the contrast between Hilde and the other female characters. Kaja and Aline are both sickly and delicate in appearance, thus mirroring the dreariness of the windowless room in their characters and appearance. Hilde (as Solness, incidentally, although to a

²⁰ Rønning notes: "Det er noe mer enn et teaterteknisk grep når Ibsen i flere av sine dramaer lar skikkelsen bevege seg gjennom en dør fra hjemmet til kontoret. Det uttrykker en følelsesstruktur som preget Ibsens europeiske publikum som bebodde hus som de spekulerende byggmestre bygde" (1994a:108).

larger degree), appears to be too full of vitality to “fit” into this windowless room with its air of oppression. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the settings of the subsequent acts become progressively lighter and freer as she gains influence in the play (a topic I discuss in some detail later in this chapter). Hilde is clearly associated with the outdoors, as indicated by her manner, clothing and the conversation she has with Dr. Herdal. This theme is taken up again later in conversation with Solness, when Hilde is likened to a wild bird which ought not to be caged.

In Brynhildsvoll’s description of the different attitudes to space in literature, the appearance of Kaja and Aline would reflect a measure of a secondary attitude to spatiality, which uses space for the visualising of the non-spatial (the same goes for the appearance of Knut Brovik, and to a certain extent that of Ragnar too). Yet, the description of space as rendered by observation belongs in his view to the primary attitude of space (the type of stage descriptions used by Ibsen belongs to this attitude, as do the architectural activities pursued in the room, though an element of creation and ordering of space is of course involved here). In my view, a curious mixture of these two attitudes prevails throughout *The Master Builder*. The observation and description of space as part of the primary attitude in literature are the tenants of realism, while the secondary attitude at first glance seems more akin to symbolism. With that said, the description of the location of action in order to mirror the characters within it nevertheless also has a long realist tradition, just think of Dickens, for example. Yet, in *The Master Builder*, this secondary attitude to space seems to be the one adopted by most of the characters. Solness wanted to build light and sunny homes, because he thought it would inscribe homes with happiness. Hilde appears to have invested all her dreams in the images of castles and towers, while Aline has

stored all her capacity for happiness in the old house and the possessions it contained. Thus, we have a constant tension between the overtly realistic descriptions (in the sense that they seem to be rendered from observation, even if that observation stems from dreams or the imagination) and the inner significance the images have for the characters.

The office space comprises a front room (workroom) with a drafting room behind it (referred to as an “arbejdsværelse” and a “tegneværelse” (XII, p. 33), respectively). This creates a kind of doubling effect, with a room represented on stage, behind which another room is found. Brian Johnston notes that this is reminiscent of the setting of *Hedda Gabler* and suggests that the play starts with the same atmosphere of “spiritual self-division” which the previous group of plays exhibits.²¹ He remarks that this first of the last plays “decisively will break into light and air and visual affirmation” (1975:273). Although Ibsen does not make as much use of this doubling effect here as for example in *The Wild Duck*, where the loft behind the studio in the Ekdal home plays such an important role and, in Toril Moi’s words, “is described almost as a near-perfect photographic negative of the attic room in the foreground” (2001:42), I do think that it has some significance. Northam identifies a “hint of confinement” (1953:174) in the backroom, but this he locates in Ibsen’s descriptions of the physical appearance of the characters, rather than in the *location* of the backroom. In my opinion the entire office smacks of confinement (which is somewhat exaggerated in the backroom), as much due to the physical characteristics of the place as to the characters inhabiting it at the start of the play. This is a small, windowless room, located right at the back of another windowless room. The backroom has no other

²¹ Johnston groups *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea* and *Hedda Gabler* together in his conception of Ibsen’s prose play cycle.

points of access than the door between that and the bigger office space. It would therefore have been quite easy for Ibsen to use this backroom as a place where the problems of the front room are magnified and scrutinised. This would mean that if the front room were to be called “bad” or “dark”, the backroom would automatically be “worse” and “darker”. Yet this is not truly the case in *The Master Builder*. Practically none of the action is physically set in the backroom, though it facilitates the action, as I discuss in detail below. Additionally, though it may be a place of confinement because it is so difficult to come out of it, it may equally be seen as a place of relative safety, since it is as difficult to enter it from the outside. Here it may be worthwhile to recall Solness’s description of the way in which he has tried to protect himself from the younger generation:

SOLNESS. ...Derfor så har jeg låset og stængt mig inde. (hemmelighedsfuldt.) de skal vide, at ungdommen vil komme her og dundre på døren! Bryde ind til mig!

HILDE. Så synes jeg. De skulde gå ud og lukke opp for ungdommen da.

SOLNESS. Lukke opp?

HILDE. Ja. Så ungdommen kunde få slippe ind til Dem. Så’n med det gode.

(XII, p. 66)

Ironically enough, Solness had at this stage of course already opened the door to youth in the form of Hilde of his own accord, and accepted her memories as true, or at least as good as true. It has not been necessary for anyone to break the door down, Solness just opened up. Similarly, by trying to confine Ragnar to his service, Solness had already let the younger generation he appears to fear so much into his domain. The measure of safety Solness has achieved by locking himself in, however, stems rather from self-confinement. It would seem as if the gap between the positive and negative implication of confinement is very small in *The Master Builder*. There is however, not much evidence of the safety confinement may offer in the conception of the drafting room in the play, accept perhaps in the detail that Old Brovik asks Ragnar

and Kaja to go there *and* “close the door after [them]” (p. 787) so that he can speak to Solness without letting them realise how ill he really is. It is, in some ways, therefore, a place in which ignorance is allowed to prevail. This takes place in the way in which Solness refuses to recognise Ragnar’s ability, and the curious way in which Old Brovik also seems to depend on this recognition, even though he surely ought to be able to judge his son’s work independently, given that he too was the master of his trade before Solness took his position. This property of the backroom is also evident, as I discuss below, in the fact that while the Broviks sit and work there, they are apparently oblivious of what is happening between Solness and Kaja. Incidentally, Kaja is clearly less used to the deception than Solness is. At the beginning of the first act, she “seems nervous and ill at ease” (p. 786) when Solness comes in asking if the others are still there (without knowing that they already know that he has arrived). Later in the act, when Kaja is alone with Solness and he urges her to get up because he can hear someone approaching, she “falters over to the desk” (p. 792). When Mrs. Solness returns with the doctor after a short while, Kaja has clearly forgotten that the pretext of her staying on has been a letter, because she is “confused” (p. 794) when Mrs. Solness asks her if the letter is finished. Solness, on the other hand, appears fully in control of the situation, and immediately remarks on the shortness of the letter (*loc. cit.*). Yet, in spite of her apparent inability to play any of these games as well as Solness is playing them, according to Solness, Kaja appeared at his office, as though they already have made an appointment to talk about her possible employment at the office (p. 797).

An interesting adjunct to the feature of the backroom is Jon Nygaard’s observation of Ibsen’s tendency to endow the background with meaning. He lists some examples of

how the background becomes a place associated with threat or danger on the stage in the prose plays, as for example, the portrait on the wall and the inner room in *Hedda Gabler*, and of course the loft in *A Wild Duck* (Nygaard 1992:172). Here, the backroom may be associated with the threat Solness experiences the youth as posing, since it is quite literally the space in which Ragnar made the sketches for the couple who wants to build at Løvstrand, which may see him starting to work on his own, especially after receiving Solness's belated endorsement in the second act. Yet, to me this backroom does not appear unambiguously negative. In some ways, it functions as a space in which the Ibsenian *livsløgn* is to a large degree allowed to prevail. Though clinging to a life-lie is in many ways ultimately a negative and untenable position to take, it does have a short-term positive aspect to it, in that it makes life more tolerable. The *livsløgn* does not only prevail in the backroom by its facilitation of ignorance, as noted above, but perhaps more pertinently in the way in which the danger posed by Ragnar seems largely a figment of Solness's imagination. That Ragnar and the younger generation in general (with the paradoxical exception of Hilde, perhaps) poses no true threat to Solness, is articulated by Dr. Herdal: "Hah! The young! I'd hardly say that you're obsolete. No, you've probably never been better established than you are now" (p. 800). Hilde too expresses a similar opinion when she dismisses Ragnar's sketches as "scribbles", and later convinces Solness to give his approval to Ragnar, although I think her motivation for convincing him not to be afraid of the youth is entirely different from Dr. Herdal's sober consideration of the current situation. Hilde knows that if Solness decided to build castles in the air with her, having another competitor will make very little difference. Ragnar's description of the gathering crowd at the wreathing ceremony seems also an indication of his currently unassailable position. They have come to mock him, to indulge in a type of

schadenfreude, which is due precisely because of his otherwise secure position in his trade: “He’s kept us down so long — now we’re going to see him have the pleasure of keeping himself down” (p. 857). Furthermore, despite his bitterness, Ragnar does nothing to provoke the accident which leads to Solness’s death – he does not taunt him, or challenge him to climb the tower, he tries to help Aline prevent Solness to climb the tower by calling him back to the house under the pretext that someone wants to speak to him. His motive for this may of course be described rather as selfish (if Solness does not climb the tower he and the other young people get what they came to see, or, more specifically *not* to see) than as altruistic, but his harmlessness as far as Solness is concerned is hereby emphasised, in my view. The approval of Ragnar’s sketches, incidentally, is a practical example of a life-lie on a variety of levels. In the beginning of the first act, Brovik in effect asks Solness’s approval, even if he is not sure that his son deserves it, so that he may not die thinking Ragnar worthless. He is consciously seeking a life-lie to sustain him, if he truly doubts Ragnar’s ability. Yet this doubt in his son’s ability seems in itself to be a negative type of life-lie – on some level Brovik *knows* Ragnar will be able to build on his own, yet chooses to believe that this needs to be confirmed by Solness in order to be realised. Even if Ragnar may need Solness’s recommendation in order to get a commission of his own, the failure to get this formality completed should not engender doubt about his ability in Brovik’s mind. In turn, Solness’s refusal to give his approval is the outcome of his own negative life-lie, namely that he would be completely destroyed by the younger generation. Therefore, when he later consents to lie about the sketches for the old man’s sake on Hilde’s insistence, it is immensely ironic. Not only have we already learnt that Solness cannot be trusted (which makes his refusal to lie here comical), it also appears as if Ragnar deserves this

recommendation, which means that Solness will not be lying by giving it. Furthermore, the reasons for requiring his endorsement seem also to be derived from various other falsehoods.

Another, and perhaps more pertinent way in which the backroom functions is that it divides the stage space. Although this can be connected with Nygaard's view of a vertical double-drama in Ibsen in which "the realistic room of daily life" is located in front, with a "symbolic room of illusion and fiction" behind it (1997:97),²² the backroom of the first act of *The Master Builder* is not quite as ominous a presence as the similar rooms of *The Wild Duck* or *Hedda Gabler*, for instance, where Hedvig and Hedda both kill themselves in the backrooms, but *out of the view* of the audience and that of the other characters on the stage. Here, the little action which does take place in the backroom is neither hidden from the view of the audience nor out of sight to the characters in the front room. Whilst in *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler* shots are heard from the backrooms, here, if care is taken, the characters in the backroom and those in the front are *apparently* not within earshot of each other. In my view, this places an emphasis on the spatiality of the play and on the way in which language is spatialised in the text. In practice, during a theatre performance, it is of course physically impossible for the actors in the backroom not to hear the words spoken in the front room, if those words are meant to be audible to the entire audience. Yet, this situation is at the same time completely possible to stage in the theatre, because of the

²² Nygaard observes that in general in Ibsen "the inner room represents the past, the past values or important incidents in the earlier life of the characters" and "for the main characters this inner room is a holy room, a room for sacrifice, like the altar or the inner sanctum of the temple. It represents their most important memories" (1997:97). As I have argued throughout, though, *The Master Builder* does not represent a smooth continuation with its predecessors in Ibsen's oeuvre. The backroom here is clearly not as deeply steeped in symbolism as the loft of *The Wild Duck*. Yet, if one follows Nygaard's line of reasoning about the importance of the backroom, one may say that it indeed represents some of Solness's most important memories (his rise to become master of his trade) and that the Broviks are the sacrificial victims of this rise; as Ragnar tells Hilde "When it comes to stealing other people's happiness in life — like my father's and mine — there he is not afraid" (p. 851).

theatrical nature of performance – the spectators simultaneously know that the actors in the backroom can hear those in the front, and that the characters in the backroom cannot hear those in the front room. Thus, by showing how the spatiality of language on the stage (and by implication, in the text) facilitates performance and theatricality, Ibsen uses the backroom as a feature making covert meta-dramatic comments. And yet, as we have seen more than once in this discussion already, any easy interpretation of the play is usually thwarted. Here it is either undermined or at least rendered ironic by Knut Brovik's command that Kaja close the door after her. This detail may, on the one hand, carry the implication that Brovik *knows* their conversation will otherwise be overheard (though it appears as if Ragnar only learns about what has been going on between Solness and Kaja in the last act); on the other hand though, Old Brovik's command can also be viewed as meta-dramatic, since it draws attention to the stage set-up itself, as I discuss below.

McAuley emphasises that the stage has a “psychic function that is analogous to Bachelard's casket since it is constantly “playing with the possibilities of revelation, with the relationship between the shown and the not-shown, the shown and the partially shown” (1999:74-5). Bachelard's notion of the casket or chest as part of an exterior space when it is closed, but effacing the outside when it is opened (1994:85), seems especially apt for the notion of the Ibsenian stage as presenting a “slice of life”. In other words, if the illusion presented on stage is close enough to our everyday perceived reality, we will forget that we are looking at something that is fictional. This complete suspension of disbelief is however not, in my opinion, what Ibsen strives for, but, as I have pointed out above, setting *The Master Builder* in the tradition of realism has many advantages. To return to the point about the caskets:

here we have a casket in a casket in a casket²³ (or a room in a room on a stage), the ideal setting for a play within a play.²⁴ Yet, in the opening scenes of *The Master Builder*, it is not so much the backroom that acts as a stage to the front room, but the reverse: the front room becomes the stage and the backroom the place for the audience on stage. In the conversation with Brovik, as in the earlier whispered conversation with Kaja, the division of the office into two rooms makes the action practically possible and more believable. I return below to this notion that meta-drama is here and elsewhere facilitated by the spatiality of the setting.

The office is described as “tarvelig udstyret” (XII, p. 33). This seems to emphasise the functionality of this space – it ought to be used for working, rather than relaxation. Presumably there is only a single drafting table in the backroom (“bordet”), above which another lamp is lit (*loc. cit.*). A small detail in this connection is that none of the working spaces seems to be exclusively for Solness’s use. The desk appears to be mainly for the use of his bookkeeper, and if he uses the drafting room, he presumably has to share the drafting table with the Broviks. Later, when Solness talks to them, he does not enter the backroom itself, but “pauses at the drafting room door” (p. 787). On the contrary, the more comfortable chairs arranged around the room appear to belong to Solness’s sphere of influence and he apparently also receives his guests here, on occasion, since this is where the rest of the act with Dr. Herdal and Hilde Wangel is set. One can easily exaggerate the importance of a tiny detail like this, but I do think that it may be symptomatic of Solness’s obvious uncertainty about his career as a master builder, as expressed in his conversation with Dr. Herdal later in

²³ Similarly, Nygaard observes that “in modern theatre there is no longer an interaction between stage and audience. The modern stage is in a double sense a closed box” (1997:85).

²⁴ The notion of meta-drama in the form of a play within a play in especially the first act of *The Master Builder* is explored in much detail by Helland (1994 and 1997:66-75).

the scene and in his perhaps disproportionate fear of the next generation. Solness's remark that "I need Ragnar — and the old man as well. He has a real knack for calculating stresses, cubic content — all that damned detail work" (p. 796) appears to indicate that Solness is unable to do these calculations properly himself, or at least doubts his own ability in this regard. This doubt may be imagined or may be founded in reality, much as his seemingly disproportionate fear of the younger generation or the idea that he may be verging on insanity. Perhaps the lengths to which Solness goes in order to keep Ragnar as an employee can be better explained as a result of his doubt in his own ability to do the work, for which, as he admits to Hilde, he has not formally been trained (p. 824). This is not the only time where it is hinted that Solness may not be as successful in his profession as may be wished, or that he at least doubts his own abilities. In the stage description at the start of the third act of the play, for instance, the "homes for human beings" (p. 824) which Solness had built on the land where Aline's childhood home used to stand are described as "small, low dilapidated houses" (p. 840). Yet, as always seems to happen when attempting to pin *The Master Builder* down and interpret something unambiguously, the play seems to resist and offer evidence to the contrary. When Solness first steps onto the stage, he is carrying "a couple of portfolios" under his arm (p. 786). On the most practical level, these are of course props which make Solness easily identifiable as "the chief" Old Brovik mentions so "vehemently" (p. 786) just moments before, since the theatre audience do not have the benefit of stage directions. In a realistic manner it also makes his late entrance plausible — he has obviously been out of the office on some business — therefore enabling the first scene to be set without him and to establish the mood and tensions of the office before his appearance; thus creating a prejudice towards Solness in the mind of the reader, as it were. The fact that Solness appears

with these props related to his work, however, also seems to indicate that he is involved in more than giving orders and running the office, as my reading of his self-doubt about his vocation may have seemed to suggest. One should also remember that Solness probably would not have reached the pinnacle of his profession if he were inadequately equipped to handle the technical aspects of the job. Yet, I do think the question about his true ability as a builder is ever completely resolved, neither in the play as a whole, nor in Solness's own mind, though in this regard one must not discount Solness's propensity for casting himself as different from others; he may well derive some pleasure from doubting himself, as he gets some satisfaction from his wife's suspicions.

The remaining directions concerning the layout of the stage are, typically for Ibsen, very meticulous. Nygaard stresses that in Ibsen the most important function of the furniture and other details on the stage is to indicate *movement*, and that this is the main reason why he gives such detailed indications as to their placement (1992:170). This corresponds with McAuley's view that the characteristic feature of theatre is movement, rather than mimesis (1999:92) and that "objects on the stage tend to merge into the background, and they become meaningful only when handled, looked at, or referred to" because it is "the presence of the actors that makes the space meaningful" (McAuley 1999:90-1). The principle of creating meaning through the stage set-up and props is clearly underscored by the details Ibsen chooses to give. Upstage from the folding doors there is a stove, which implies that the front room may be warmer and cosier than the backroom, something which is further emphasised by the rest of the furniture in the bigger room. These include a sofa and some chairs are arranged around a table on which some water in a carafe and a drinking glass are placed and

which is illuminated by a light in the upstage right-hand corner. This is where Old Brovik and Solness will have their conversation a bit later. In the foreground on the right there is another table with a rocking chair and armchair.²⁵ This is the area in which Solness receives Dr. Herdal in the later scene. Interestingly, in both these cases the characters draw attention to the props on the stage in the dialogue. Solness first invites Knut Brovik to sit down, and he then asks for a glass of water, which Solness pours (p. 790). Both of these actions draw attention to the space as represented on stage. This may either be seen as adding to the realism of the portrayal, or as an indication of character. Brovik, on the one hand, sits down with difficulty in the armchair, according to the stage directions, and he “stumbles” to get to the water and these actions emphasise his frailty. Solness, on the other hand, is first “adjusting the armchair” (p. 788) before Brovik sits down, and later pours and gives him the glass of water. These seemingly kind actions are in direct contrast with Solness’s treatment of the old man and his son, and just emphasises the ambiguous nature of his character further. Downstage on the left there is a desk (also lit for working) at which the bookkeeper, Kaja Fosli, is standing. In the theatre, where “konvensjon gjør også at små bevegelser, som å ta på bord eller stol, er nok til å markere makt og posisjon” (Nygaard 1992:170), the fact that Kaja is standing while working is surely significant. Ragnar and his father both sit down at the drawing table, because the stage directions later indicate their “getting up” and “rising” (p. 787), respectively, in conversation with Solness. She is the most junior member of staff, but, as becomes clear, also Solness’s key for retaining Ragnar and thus maintaining the status quo. She is furthermore simultaneously playing different roles, something which makes her intensely uncomfortable (though I think she is more unnerved by her own inability to

²⁵ Nygaard also notes: “Når [Ibsen] anger mange stoler i forskjellige utforminger og plasseringer, så har de alle en funksjon og en betydning som går ut over å være et sittedeskap for dem som opptre” (1992:170).

play the role of bookkeeper in such a way that Mrs. Solness does not find her suspicious than she is by any moral scruples about this), and this may be mirrored in the rather uncomfortable working conditions she has. The fact that she is not sitting down makes it also easier in the following scene with Solness to fall on her knees and to run to retrieve Ragnar's sketches. This minute detail can thus be both interpreted as symbolic or as extremely practical. The shade that she is wearing to protect her eyes similarly provides impetus for the dialogue, because when she takes it off Solness *asks* her about it, and thus the audience learns more about her feelings towards him – she does not want to look ugly in his eyes. It may also be seen as significant that she takes off the shade, thus either worsening her own eyesight, or at least disadvantaging her comfort in doing her work, so that she may appear prettier in his view. Her actions here are clearly theatrical in nature, and, additionally, also meta-dramatic in the sense that it constitutes a performance within the play, as discussed by Helland (esp. 1997:79-80). The action here seems to be analogous to the way in which Kaja later accepts Solness's hasty reassurance that he really wants to keep her with him, and not for the sake of keeping Ragnar. Because of the subsequent importance in the play of what is or has been seen (whether real, imagined, or remembered) and what is unseen, and the gradual movement from the concrete to the abstract (castles in the air cannot be seen), this moment may even be said to function allegorical in relation to the rest of the action. Choosing how to appear and what to see are important to all the main characters.

Now I turn the discussion more to the spatiality of the text as emphasised by the entries and exits of the characters. McAuley sees one of the main functions of exits as that of activating the offstage as a fictional place (McAuley 1999:98). Yet,

paradoxically, moments of exit are often the moments when the presentational can take precedence over the fictional, as the audience applauds or the set is adjusted; as McAuley remarks: “It seems that whenever the exit functions to locate the offstage as fictional place it functions also to activate a subliminal awareness on the part of the spectator that it is no such thing” (1999:99-100). As becomes clear in my discussion, I think entrances function in much the same way, since they simultaneously help to construct the illusion of reality presented on stage, whilst showing it to be just that.

Even though *The Master Builder* starts with the characters already onstage, I briefly look at the very first scene in this context too. The first words of the play, as uttered by the ailing Knut Brovik, seem to grasp the prevailing atmosphere of *The Master Builder* uncannily accurately, and appear completely fitting in the closeted surroundings of this windowless room.²⁶ Almost all of the characters (with the conspicuous exception of Dr. Herdal), seem ready to exclaim “Nej, nu holder jeg det snart ikke lenger ud!” (XII, p. 33) as Brovik does. Knut Brovik also makes clear that he is utterly dissatisfied with Solness, since he calls Solness “the chief” with barely “repressed resentment” (p. 786). This immediately throws some suspicion on the working relationship of the office, even before Solness makes his first appearance on the stage. This feeling of unease is intensified directly thereafter by Kaja and Ragnar’s reactions to Brovik’s suggestion to “putting it straight up” (*loc. cit.*) to Solness. It is straightaway quite obvious that they are wary of Solness, or his possible reaction to what Brovik may have to say. These first lines as spoken between the three characters on stage also put them in a slightly conspiratorial light – here are three office workers alone in the office, clearly disgruntled with something regarding

²⁶ This view has been expressed by many critics, see for example, Theoharis (1996:137).

their work or the way in which the office is managed, and yet also scared of speaking up about the problem. The spatial implication of this opening scene is that it sets up the three employees in a grouping poised against Solness, even before he enters.

There are three doors in the office: folding doors in the left wall leading to the outside entrance, a door to the right leading to the house itself and an open door in the back wall leading to the drafting room. The door or entry to the stage is very important in establishing that there is a fictional offstage space too. McAuley holds that the “nature of the door articulates the relationship between the here and the beyond” (1999:87-8). Bachelard distinguishes between the two functions of the door, namely keeping out and letting in, which in turn correspond with my earlier discussion of the properties of the backroom:

...the door is an entire cosmos of the half-open. In fact, it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings. The door schematizes two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of daydream. At times, it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open.

(1994:222)

In the first act of *The Master Builder*, special attention is repeatedly drawn to the door. Right at the start of the play, when Solness’s employees are talking before his arrival, Kaja suddenly says, “Shh! I hear him down on the stairs” (p. 786). On her words, they return to their places and pretend to have been working all the time. This is of course part of the play within the play, but it is also meta-dramatic in a much broader sense: the *announcement* of Solness’s impending entry is as much a stage direction imbedded in the dialogue as the abundant Shakespearian examples of its kind. It is not only a cue for the actor to appear on stage, but also alerts the audience to the fact that there is, in McAuley’s terminology, a “contiguous offstage fictional

place, localised in relation to the onstage space”, in this case, the stairs on which Solness is heard to be approaching the door. Drawing attention to his coming is not only functional in that it provides the characters already on the stage with a plausible reason to return to their work and thus for the next scene to take place as it does, but it also serves to anchor the stage scene more securely in the fictional reality it represents. As such it is firmly rooted in the realistic tradition. Yet, the obverse is also true – this implicit stage direction draws attention the fact that someone is offstage (likely even pretending to come up a flight of stairs), and realism is thus concurrently undermined, since attention is drawn to the deliberate artificiality of the performance.

Solness’s first appearance on the stage likewise sets the tone for his behaviour throughout much of the play and intensifies the conspiratorial atmosphere. Upon entering the scene, however, he right away weakens the grouping set up by the employees. He asks Kaja in a whisper if the others have left, even if he is the boss, and as such, would certainly not be out of place asking such a question openly. This immediately makes the cohesiveness of the conspiratorial group previously set up by his employees less certain than it appeared at first. In the whispered conversation with Kaja it is revealed that she desperately wants to appear attractive to him. Solness strokes her hair, a very personal and intimate action, which indicates that their relationship is more complex than the working relationship between an employer and his bookkeeper. Again, the conspirative mood in the office is intensified by Kaja’s whispering of “ssh — they can hear you!” (p. 786). Yet, as discussed above, despite what this warning may indicate, the others apparently remained oblivious of what has been happening. Through her warning, however, it becomes clear that she takes some

part in Solness's game, although one later learns that she is not aware of the full extent of it. It should of course be noted at this point that the stage setting, with the division into the different rooms enables these games to be played out, as Solness *can* whisper to Kaja, apparently without the other characters on stage seeing or hearing him do this. After Solness has learnt that the others are still in the drafting room, he speaks aloud to Kaja. Whatever he says aloud, as opposed to what he whispers, is therefore intended for the hearing of everyone. Thus, what he says aloud becomes a performance for everyone, while what he whispers is part of the secret little game only Kaja knows he is playing. The audience (or reader) involuntarily is sucked into this game, because they are privy to everything happening on stage, while not even all the characters on the stage are in the know. This short exchange between Solness and Kaja emphasises the spatial nature of the setting. Much the same announcement technique is used by Solness a bit later, when he tells Kaja "Get up! Get up now, I — I hear someone coming!" just before Aline enters the room from the other side, thus establishing the localised fictional place of the rest of the Solness house for the audience (thereby possibly for the first time making obvious to a theatre audience that the workroom is part of the house, as mentioned above). Solness also later calls Aline to tell her of Hilde's arrival, thus drawing attention to the physical characteristics of the stage space and the fictional place represented in it.

McAuley discusses the conventions surrounding the entrance of an actor into the presentational space as evidence of the importance moments of entrance (1999:96-8) in theatre. Surely the most remarkable entrance in *The Master Builder* is that of Hilde later in the first act. Her knock on the door comes almost directly after Solness

predicts that the younger generation will arrive to usurp him by “knocking at the door” (p. 800):

SOLNESS. Omslaget kommer. Jeg aner det. Og jeg føler at det nærmer sig. En eller anden gi'r sig til at kræve: træd tilbage for mig! Og så stormer alle de andre efter og truer og skriger: gi' plads, — gi' plads, — gi' plads! Jo, pas De bare på, doktor. Engang kommer ungdommen her og banken på døren —

DOKTOR HERDAL (lér). Nå, herregud, hvad så?

SOLNESS. Hvad så? Jo, så er det slut med bygmester Solness.

(Det banker på døren til venstre.)

SOLNESS (farer sammen). Hva er det? Hørte De noget?

DOKTOR HERDAL. Det er nogen som banker.

(XII, p. 51-2)

Again, as with the previous entrances of Solness and Aline into the room, Hilde's arrival is announced in advance. Yet, the announcements of the previous entrances mainly serve to establish the reality of the fiction represented on stage by providing plausible grounds for the subsequent action, and by simultaneously setting up the fictional offstage in the minds of the spectators. Although the previous announced entrances may have destabilised realism to a certain extent, this entrance undermines the reality so carefully crafted by the plausible motivations provided for the action in the preceding scenes. In Hornby's terms, it effectively deconstructs realism.

This moment has attracted varied comment from critics. Aarseth, on the one hand, points out that Hilde's knock on the door is not the type of change or “omslag” Solness expects from the youth, but rather a change in the Aristotelian sense, namely *peripeteia* (1999:252-3), a sudden reversal of circumstances. Frode Helland sees Hilde's entrance on the stage in this manner as an example of the traditional *deus ex machina* device (1997:95 *et seqq.*). Haugen, on the other hand points out that “it is so highly coincidental and so pat that no truly realistic play could tolerate it. But there is

poetic justice and humor in the shape that youth takes” (1979:105), while Gray holds that “the simultaneity of the knock is unimportant, merely one of Ibsen’s rougher touches” (1977:151). While I strongly disagree with Gray, I think most of the other interpretations provide one with interesting angles. Contrary to Haugen, although I do not miscount the humorous effect of the disparity between Solness’s dire prediction and the representative of youth that does enter his house, I would not call this “poetic justice” in the ordinary sense of the term. I do think, however, that the manner in which Hilde enters the play clearly underscores the fact that the action has now entered the realm of fiction in more ways than the realistic setting and characters of the beginning presupposed. Here, the action has to a certain extent been transferred to the sphere of the fantastical, and has become part of the “strange story” (p. 796) Solness has begun to tell Dr. Herdal. As such, I think Hilde’s knock is certainly *poetically justified*. The fact that Hilde is a character that has previously featured in Ibsen’s work (she is one of the daughters in *The Lady from the Sea*), also roots her in fictionality, to a certain extent.²⁷ Yet, in her liveliness, appearance and her reference to her “grimy” (p. 802) underwear, she appears also more firmly rooted in reality and more at ease with her own bodily existence than many of the other characters. This gives her too a fundamentally ambiguous streak. Many critics have pointed out that Hilde’s knock may be seen as a direct manifestation of Solness power to change the future as in the case of the appointment of Kaja, which he just told Dr. Herdal about.²⁸ This is certainly how Dr. Herdal jestingly interprets it,

DOKTOR HERDAL. ... (lér.) De spåde sandt alligevel, De, herr Solness!

SOLNESS. Hvorledes det?

DOKTOR HERDAL. Ungdommen kom altså dog og banked på hos Dem.

SOLNESS (oplivet). Ja, det var nu på en anden måde, det.

²⁷ This is a point I discuss more thoroughly in the section on repetition in the next chapter.

²⁸ Amongst others, see for example Theoharis (1996:142).

DOKTOR HERDAL. Var så, ja. Unægtelig det!

(XII, p. 54)

Yet, Solness's unwillingness to accept that the knock on the door here has anything to do with his prediction that the younger generation will come, undermines his story about the power he has over Kaja, and puts everything he subsequently tells about his supernatural ability to call on the helpers and servants in an even more doubtful light. Solness's failure to recognise Hilde as part of the younger generation and the change he fears it will bring, and his insistence of casting her as a tool that may be used against the youth, may indeed be said to directly lead to his death:

SOLNESS. Nej, nej, nej! Ungdommen, — det er gengældelsen, det, ser De. Den kommer i spidsen for omslaget. Ligesom under en ny fane.

HILDE (rejser sig, ser på ham og siger med en dirrende trækning om munden). Kan De bruge mig til noget, bygmester?

SOLNESS. Ja, det kan jeg rigtignok nu! For De kommer også — ligesom under en ny fane, synes jeg. Ungdom imod ungdom altså —!

(XII, p. 66)

This insistence on not seeing Hilde as part of the youth he feels threatened by is just another instance of a character only seeing what he/she wants to see in the play. It also shows how far Solness would go in his belief that he is one of the “certain special, chosen people who have a gift and power and capacity to *wish* something, *desire* something, *will* something — so insistently and so — so inevitably — that at last it *has* to be theirs” (p. 830, orig. emphasis).

Some attention is also drawn to the numerous exists of the first act. As mentioned before, Brovik asks Kaja to join Ragnar in the drafting room and to close the door behind them. Later, Solness asks Ragnar to take his father home, and on exiting Knut Brovik again (as with his first words) introduces some of the recurrent themes of *The Master Builder*, namely that of sleep and dreaming, and the notion of having a robust

conscience. The fact that this is his last words in the play gives it an added ominousness on second reading. The attention drawn to this exit also makes Kaja's staying behind all the more conspicuous. Aline's first appearance in the play, which, as described above, is itself announced, is in order to announce the impending exit of the doctor. And when Kaja does eventually leave, this gives the impetus for the exchange in which Mrs. Solness's resentment towards her is expressed in no uncertain terms, which in turn sets the tone for the conversation between Solness and Dr. Herdal, in which he tells the doctor the "strange story". Subsequently, Dr. Herdal's exit is also announced (as is his eventual return, in advance) and this enables Solness and Hilde to talk about what happened (or may not have happened) ten years ago. Similarly, Aline's exit to prepare one of the nurseries provides the opportunity for their peculiar presence in the childless home to be discussed. When the last exits of the act take place, it pairs Aline with Dr. Herdal, and Hilde with Solness. Although this can of course be explained in the light of customs and courtesy, it also provides a visual (and spatial) presentation of the alliances between the characters, as they will remain throughout the rest of the play.

The rapid succession of scenes in the first act gives the play some momentum, and also sets the realistic background for the telling of the strange stories. The quick scene changes are often emphasised by the way in which characters in the dialogue draws attention to the entrances and exists. As I have argued throughout, this both serves to anchor the action in wider fictional reality, but at the same time undermines the realism by drawing attention to the mechanics of the theatre. Another function of the rapid scene changes is that it creates the illusion that much more is taking place onstage than there really is. If the play followed a true realistic trajectory, some of the

unfinished actions of the first act would have been followed up in the next. Yet, Solness's demand that Kaja finds a way to make Ragnar stay on, for instance, is never picked up again later in the play. The complete opposite happens – he decides to let them all go. Hereby the change brought on by the arrival of Hilde is emphasised. Through the quick succession of the scenes a number of themes can be introduced, and the theatrical nature of much of the action is underscored, which in turn gives the foundation for subsequent interpretation.

2.2.3 The second act

As mentioned above, I am only looking at selected examples of the functioning of performance space in the second act. The second act is set in the “attractively furnished” small living room of the Solness home (p. 814). This room has two distinctive features. Firstly, there is the profusion of plants and flowers it contains. There are flower stands in the right-hand corner, in front of a bow window, with more “flowers and plants richly displayed” throughout the room (p. 814). And secondly, it is much lighter than the workroom in which the first act is set. There is not only a bow window, but also a glass door in the back wall, which leads out to the veranda and garden. Both of these attributes give the room much more of an outdoors feel than one might expect of a living room. Further, the room contains a bookcase towards the back on the left, a sofa and some chairs arranged with a table towards the left-hand downstage. On the right-hand downstage there is a console table and a large mirror, and a small table with a couple of chairs are placed downstage of the bow window. It is early morning.

I think the distinctively outdoors character of this room is quite important in the light of Aline's admission to Hilde at the start of the third act that she never goes out to the garden anymore, because she thinks that the garden has grown so strange to her that it does not feel if it belongs to her anymore (p. 841). Aline's relationship with the past is extremely complex. She seems both to reject the notion that the past cannot immutably continue in the present, and yet simultaneously acutely aware of the ways in which her idealised past differs from the present. Here, she seems to have created an indoors garden in order to avoid facing how her childhood garden has changed outside. Having all these plants inside, emphasises Aline's association with the indoors, which is later further extended to her association with death and tombs (her black dress is already an indication of this). Aline is tending the plants in the opening scene, which may be seen as a visual illustration of her ability for "building up the souls of children" (p. 827), which Solness ascribes to her.²⁹ Yet, in the light of her frequent use of the word "pligt", it is likely that she would see the tending of the plants as duty rather than pleasure. Additionally, I think it underscores her preference for the imitation rather than the real, which is also expressed in her mourning the loss of her nine dolls seemingly more acutely than the death of her own babies. Helland notes that the flower is an ambivalent symbol, since it is associated both with vitality, renewal and spring and with death and ephemerality (1997:121). Incidentally, another way of simultaneously both avoiding and experiencing the outside world is by reading. Solness indeed owns a number of books that are displayed in the bookcase in the room. Yet, perhaps symptomatic of the increasingly fanciful nature of the conversations between Solness and Hilde, and of the states of mind that give rise to these conversations, they have both given up reading, and in Hilde's words "can't

²⁹ This is how Northam interprets the "significance of Aline's flowers" (1953:180).

connect with [the books] anymore” (p. 820).³⁰ This makes the difference between Hilde and Solness’s worldviews and that of Aline more acute: while Aline prefers the imitation to reality, Solness and Hilde seem to shun the “artificiality” of indulging in books and reading, while instead preferring to generate their own fantasies. As shown above, though Hilde serves as a catalyst for Solness’s complete immersion in a fantasy world, he has already had these tendencies long before she arrived, in his view of himself as someone with paranormal abilities, who can influence the course of events merely by wishing for a change. Hilde, as I have argued above, seems already to be more closely related to the fictional than many of the other characters, in that she is a recurrent Ibsen character.

One of the more peculiar spatial elements of the play, namely the three nurseries of the childless Solness home, is discussed in some detail in this act. In McAuley’s terms, the nurseries form part of the unlocalised offstage space, but since they must be physically close to the living room in the fictional world represented on the stage, they have a kind of looming presence. The fact that they are not clearly located in relation to the onstage space just exaggerates the omnipresent shadow they cast over the house and its inhabitants. Significantly, there are three nurseries, whilst there had only ever been two children, who presumably died before the current Solness home had been built. In the first act, the nurseries, were briefly, but notably, introduced:

FRU SOLNESS. ...Så skal jeg sé at få et værelse gjort lidt hyggelig for Dem.

SOLNESS. Kan vi ikke ta’ et af barnekammerserne? For de star jo fuldt færdige, de.

FRU SOLNESS. Å jo. Der har vi mere end plads nok....

(...)

³⁰ Helland interprets this detail of the books as another meta-dramatic comment, which problematises any reading of the play, similar to Solness’s warning that one shouldn’t listen to what he says at the beginning of the first act (1997:148).

HILDE (standser og ser på ham). Har De flere barnekammerser, De?

SOLNESS. Her er tre barnekammerser i huset.

HILDE. Det var svært. Så har De vel følt mange barn da?

SOLNESS. Nej. Vi har ingen barn. Men nu kan jo De få være barn her så længe.

HILDE. For inat, ja. Jeg skal ikke skrike. Jeg vil prøve om jeg ikke kan få sove
som en sten.

(XII, p. 55)

Significantly, it is Solness who first suggests letting Hilde sleep in a nursery for the night. Aline here for the first time takes up the theme of emptiness, although much less directly than she is to do in the second act. Further, Solness here casts Hilde in the role of a child, which she accepts without any questioning. In fact, despite her slight reservation expressed in the word “inat”, she appears to embrace this role and elaborates on it in order to arrive at the theme of dreaming, which is so important throughout the play. Also in the first act, when Aline comes back to tell them that the room has been made ready, the point that Hilde is to sleep in the middle nursery is emphasised, and again Solness implies that she will become a child in the house:

FRU SOLNESS. Se så, frøken Wangel, nu er værelset i orden til Dem.

(...)

SOLNESS (til fru). Barnekammerset?

FRU SOLNESS. Ja. Det mellemste....

SOLNESS (nikker til Hilde). Hilde skal sove i barnekammerset, hun.

(XII, p. 66-7)

Here he also calls Hilde on her first name in Aline's presence, which consolidates the bond they had formed, and immediately puts Aline in the position of the outsider. This theme of fulfilment (embodied in Hilde's physical filling of the empty space) is taken up again in the second act:

SOLNESS. ...Så fik vi da brug for et barnekammers alligevel, vi, Aline.

FRU SOLNESS. Ja, vi fikk jo det.

SOLNESS. Og jeg synes, det er bedre, det, end at alt sammen skal stå tomt.

FRU SOLNESS. Dette tomme er så rent forfærdeligt. Det har du rett i.

SOLNESS (lukker mappen, rejser sig og går nærmere). Du skal bare få se det, Aline, at
herefter blir det nok bedre for os. Langt hyggeligere. Lettere at leve.

— Især da for dig.

FRU SOLNESS (ser på ham). Herefter?

SOLNESS. Ja, tro du mig, Aline —

FRU SOLNESS. Mener du, — fordi hun er kommen her?

SOLNESS (betvinger sig). Jeg mener naturligvis, — når vi først har flyttet ind i det nye huset.

(XII, p. 69)

Furthermore, Solness here clearly means that things will go better because Hilde has come (and filled one of the nurseries), yet, he denies this and Aline does not press the issue, thus accepting his dishonesty without comment. This ties in with the theatrical nature of the somewhat conspiratorial allegiances formed in the first act, which is emphasised by Hilde's reference to having slept in the nursery "like a child in the cradle...like a princess" (p. 818). Here she not only implicitly accepts the role of the house, but also refer to the earlier conversation she had Solness; the word "princess" effectively excludes Aline from that.³¹

Solness tells Hilde that the new house he is building also has nurseries; "three, same as here" (p. 822). So even though they have no prospects of having more children, the three empty nurseries have been replicated in the new home. Østerud describes the three empty nurseries in the new Solness home as "sepulchral monuments over the lost twins" (2002:64), while Johnston views the detail of the *three* nurseries as part of a triadic structure of the play (1975:263). Richard Sennett characterises the nursery as an invention of the nineteenth century to give children a place to play (1990:26). Instead of being places of laughter and happiness, however, both Aline and Solness associate the unused nurseries with emptiness and loss. Having the nurseries to remind them of the loss of their children is thus a peculiarly modern condition.

³¹ Sandberg remarks that "she inhabits that space metaphorically, snuggling into it 'like a princess', hinting at the complex rhetorical game that she has initiated with Solness" (2001:47).

Further, the repeated building of the nurseries serves as a spatial realisation of their feelings of loss and (self-imposed) guilt. Northam observes that “Solness wants to see the nurseries filled and sees in Hilde a fitting occupant” because she is connected with creation, since she is also associated with the “supreme act of his life”, namely the climbing of the tower at Lysanger (1953:177). Sandberg comments on the way in which Hilde makes herself at home in the Solness home, as if she actually lived there; she has “filled that third nursery unproblematically” (2001:46-7). Dines Johansen remarks on her installation in the middle nursery:

Da hun ankommer installeres hun i det midterste børneværelse, d.v.s., ikke alene integreres hun i datter-rollen, men gennem indretningen af tre børneværelser, fremstår det som om hun indtager en forudbestemt plads, hun bliver det barn, som S[olness] har håbet og ventet på.

(1980:51)

I think the fact that Hilde fits so nicely into the house, as if a room has been reserved for her, emphasises her association with fantasy and the fantastical. Yet, the imagery used in connection with the nurseries is so foreboding that Hilde’s taking up of one of the nurseries can on the whole hardly be seen as positive, in my view. If two of the three nurseries can be seen as monuments to the deceased children, or perhaps more specifically, constant physical reminders of their parents’ guilt, then the third nursery may be seen as a symbol of completely unrealised (and very unlikely to be fulfilled) potential. Yet, because of its inevitable association with the other two tomb-like nurseries, it may also serve as an indication of the futility of any dreams or fantasies. I therefore think it no mere coincidence that Hilde dreams about falling over the edge of a “terribly steep cliff” (p. 819) whilst sleeping in the nursery – a certain death knell for Solness. It is not only a portentous indication of the physical manner of his death,

but also associates dreams and dying even more closely.³² The fantastic building of castles in the air on which Hilde and Solness embark is, as it were, stillborn, and this is just accentuated by the spatiality of the play. The uncanny association between children and death is reiterated in Aline's image of the nine dolls she lost in the fire, who were "just like little unborn children" (p. 843). The empty nurseries thus figure as another instance of where the *unseen* is forcibly invoked by the *seen* – instead of symbolising happiness and the creation of new life, they uncannily signify misery and death; the haunting presence of the dead twins, which manifests itself for instance in Solness's dread of the next generation, made conspicuous by their physical absence.

In the textual space of this act there is one particularly interesting scene I also would like to discuss. First Solness stops by the bow window to point out the new house being built across the garden. This is the new house he is building for him and Aline. Then Solness asks Hilde to sit down so that she "can look out in the garden" (p. 823). Then he points out that the old house which burned down stood more or less in the same place where the new one is being built. This creates the curious spatial effect of Hilde sitting in their current house, looking out towards the place where the old house stood and upon the new house that is under construction. All the instructions about where she must sit are pointedly given in the dialogue, thus this significant arrangement is made all the more obvious to the reader. Whilst Solness is telling her about the old house, he is of course sitting opposite and looking at her; watching her as she looks at him and past him to the physical location of the events he is recounting. At the same time, the tower of the new house is evocative of the church steeple Solness climbed at Lysanger. There is therefore a peculiar spatial reflection of

³² Johnston notes that the detail of falling "combines the meanings of both birth and death – a condensed ambiguity typical of the verbal patterns of the play" (1975:286).

the past (the old house and the church) in the present view. This in a way also echoes much of the dialogue of the play – though it takes place in the present, the past is continually evoked, omnipresent in the current conversation. Johnston notes that in this arrangement, the new house signifies the future, thus bringing the third time dimension also in the picture (1975:823). I do not think, however, that the future plays much of a role in this conversation up to the point where it is interrupted by Ragnar's entrance. It is of course in a way present in the new house, but because almost the entire conversation is about the old house, Hilde is rather asked to imagine the old house superimposed on the new. This seems to me similar to what she does at the end of the play, when she hails Solness's triumphant climb to the top of the tower like her memory from Lysanger, even after he has fallen to his death in the quarry. This scene can thus be said to be a foreshadowing of the later one, or the later one a type of progressive repetition of this (a point to which I return under the discussion of the progression which takes place in the three acts at the end of the chapter).

Ragnar's entrance (which incidentally, as Kaja's at the very start of the second act, seems almost furtive compared to the announced appearances of the first act), however breaks this immersion in the past with a crude reminder of the realities of the present. He does not only bring the message that his father is "going downhill fast now" (p. 827) but also serves to tangibly reiterate the threat Solness perceives from the next generation, as he asks Solness again about his sketches. Consequently, Hilde gets up and seats herself in another place in the room where she does not have the same view, as if to confirm the chasm between the present reality and the past. Moreover, she goes to sit down unbidden in another place, after she had so carefully seated herself in accordance with Solness's instructions before. To me this seems a visual indication

of the constantly shifting balance of power in the play – it is from this position, which she has chosen herself, that she asks Solness to “talk sense” (p. 830).

2.2.4 *The third act*

Here I again only discuss selected examples from the third act. The setting for the last act is the veranda of the house. As in the previous act, the natural environment plays an important part in the setting of this act. Steps lead down into the garden from the veranda, and the branches of some trees in the garden are spread over the veranda and “towards the house” (p. 840). On the far right, the base of the tower of the new house Solness is building can be seen through the branches, while the background is formed by the garden, surrounded by an old wooden fence. On the other side of the fence a street with a row of “small, low, dilapidated houses” (*loc. cit.*) is visible. It is dusk.

The movement from inside to outside is completed in this act. A veranda is of course not completely outside – it is still part of the house where the previous acts are set. This is functional, in that it allows Aline and the doctor to disappear into the house when Solness comes, and it also visually illustrate the way in which Aline feels herself drawn between her duties to the guests inside and her husband outside. Furthermore, the veranda looks out over the garden and unto the new house. The views from this veranda differ quite remarkably from each other. On the one side, through the branches of the trees, the new house Solness is building can be seen. Yet, its most important feature, the conspicuous tower, which, according to Solness, “people are bound to say [is] too high” (p. 810) is not fully visible. This is of course for practical reasons, as much as anything else; Solness’s eventual fall from the tower is only indicated as a “human body...indistinctly seen plunging down between the

trees” in the stage directions and described by the shrieks of his wife and the visiting ladies – “He’s falling! He’s falling!” (p. 859). To the other side the view is that of the garden and the small houses Solness had built that kick-started his successful career as a master builder. Importantly, from these houses the inhabitants can look at the Solness house, something which distresses and annoys Aline considerably. As a point of interest, this idea of the people looking in (p.841) on the Solness home, faintly recalls the scene at the end of Ibsen’s 1877 play *Pillars of Society*, in which the members of the household can be seen, all but displayed to the crowd in the brightly lit garden room as fish in an aquarium. Later in the act, when Hilde describes the high tower on the castle she wants in her promised kingdom, she describes the view from there:

HILDE (langsomt). Mit slot skal ligge højt oppe. Svært højt skal det ligge. Og frit til alle sider. Så jeg kan sé vidt, — vidt udover.

SOLNESS. Og et højt tårn skal der vel være?

HILDE. Et forfærdelig højt tårn. Og øverst oppe på tårnet skal det være en altan. Og ude på den vil jeg stå —

SOLNESS (griber sig uvilkårlig om panden). At De kan like at stå så svimlende højt —

HILDE. Ja da! Just der oppe vil jeg stå og sé på de andre, — de, som bygger kirker. Og hjem for mor og far og barneflokken. Og det skal De også få komme op og sé på.

(XII, p. 109)

Paradoxically, therefore, the people living in the houses Solness built are now watching the Solness home in this way; though they are perhaps not literally looking down on the current Solness home, they are looking in on a builder of churches and homes. From the tower on the new house though, Solness would be looking down at both his present house and on the crowd (which includes Hilde), while they will all be looking up at a builder of churches and homes. If one adds to this Solness’s conception of God as a builder in his own realm, another dimension is added. In my view, the manner in which Solness’s death is witnessed is also important in this

regard. At the end of the last act, it is not only the guest and family friend (Hilde and Dr. Herdal) which stands on the veranda with Aline to watch the wreathing, but also Ragnar, Solness's former employee and the embodiment of his fear of the next generation, and some visiting ladies. At this point, thus, the stage (and its presented space, the veranda which is still part of the house and as such supposed to be private), is comparatively crowded with a curious mix of people. The strangers are no longer just looking in on the house; they are now in the house, witnessing the death of its owner.³³ Solness's attempt at again achieving the "impossible" and his subsequent fall belong to the category of public spectacle. And while this is happening, the privacy of his home is violated.

In their article "Description and Depiction: On the Indexical Function of the Icon in the Staging of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*" (1982) Jørgen Dines Johansen and Jytte Wiingaard argue that the depiction of the low cottages in the third act, together with Mrs. Solness's description of the houses built in such a way after the old garden was divided into lots that their inhabitants can look in on her, both are necessary to correct Solness's self-characterisation as a builder of homes for human beings. I do not think they so much correct his self-characterisation as emphasise the complete futility of his building project; as Solness himself remarks: "Human beings don't know how to use these homes of theirs. Not for being happy in" (p. 855). He did build *houses* for human beings, but, *homes* cannot be built, therefore his scheme was in a way doomed from the start, and this failure finds expression in the scenery of this act. This recalls his excuse for staging the adulterous play with Kaja in their home, without telling

³³ Johnston remarks, "the final action...watched by the terrified Aline, the puzzled doctor, the cynical young Ragnar, the enthusiastic ladies, and the ecstatic Hilde is scored for every level of emotional response and, with the accumulated memories that we now bring to this action, makes up one of the richest of Ibsen's *ensembles*" (1975:305).

Aline that it is not seriously meant – instead of lessening his debt to Aline, he merely causes her more pain.³⁴

At the start of this act, Aline is sitting outside when Hilde comes in from the garden. Thus, at the outset of the act, the contrast between the black-clad Aline and the lively Hilde is reiterated. They then have a conversation about the fire which destroyed the old house and the “little things” (p. 842) Aline held so dearly. During this conversation Hilde learns that Aline feels the loss of her possessions and dolls much more keenly than the death of her children, and afterwards she tells Solness that she has “just come up out of a tomb” (p. 844). This underlines Aline’s constant association with death and sickness, which has been present right from the start in her appearance³⁵ and her association with Dr. Herdal. In the second act, Solness confirms Hilde’s assumption that Aline “temperature is normally low” (p. 829) and that the babies died because his wife insisted on doing her duty to nurse them, even while she was ill from the shock after the house burned down, and that they died because of her milk.³⁶ Helland emphasises that this is medically impossible and that the children must in effect have died of hunger and interprets this detail as showing how Aline’s exaggerated sense of duty proves to be fatal (1997:141). Right at the end of the play, she similarly chooses to do her duty towards the guests, rather than to try and dissuade Solness from climbing the tower to hang the wreath. Her intervention would probably have been in vain, but it is nevertheless important, and almost pathetically comical

³⁴ See Helland (1994:316) for a discussion of this apparently unintended effect of Solness’s relationship with Kaja.

³⁵ In this act she has a white shawl with her, which Northam likens to a “white shroud” (1953:181). He also points out the repetition of the detail of the shawl, which echoes that of Rebecca in *Rosmersholm* (*loc. cit.*).

³⁶ To me, this detail of the poisoned milk evokes faint echoes of the childless Lady Macbeth’s infamous summoning of the “murd’ring ministers” to “unsex” her and “come to [her] woman’s breasts and take [her] milk for gall”, so that she may be capable of the murder of Duncan (I.v). Aline is of course by no means as one-sidedly evil as Lady Macbeth, but the fact that her children died as a direct cause of her most motherly instinct, does serve to “unsex” her and rob her of her vitality.

that she chooses not to try and save her husband, but instead leaves it to Hilde, whom she barely knows. Aline's body is thus from the start closely associated with illness and death. This is further underlined by Solness's description of Aline as a living corpse:

SOLNESS. ...Disse her magterne, — disse — disse —

HILDE. — dævlerne —

SOLNESS. Ja, dævlerne! Og troldet indeni mig også. De har tappet alt livsblodet af hende. (lér fortvilet.) For min lykkens skyld gjorde de det! Jo-jo! (tungt.) Og nu er hun død — for min skyld. Og jeg er levende lænket til den døde. (i vild angst.) Jeg — jeg, som ikke kan leve livet glædeløst!

(XII, p. 106)

Interestingly, when Hilde's conversation with Aline is interrupted by the arrival of Dr. Herdal, she talks "gaily" (p. 843) to him, but when Solness arrives, she is suddenly listless and on his question if she is cold she answers that she has been "chilled to the bone" (p. 844). After standing completely still for a while she later "lays her arms down flat on the table, rests her head on her hands, and shuts her eyes" (p. 846). When he eventually mentions the "robust conscience" of the Viking warriors they discussed in the second act, she "sits up on the bench, vivacious once more" and finally mentions the castles in the air for the first time (*loc. cit.*). Johnston remarks on this scene; "by the time Solness appears, Aline has drained away Hilde's vitality and crushed her spirit" (1975:298). Helland, on the contrary, interprets Hilde's sudden reversal in mood and her re-adoption of the same posture she used in the first act in getting Solness to accept her version of the events at Lysanger as a warning sign Solness recognises in the form it takes, but not in its function (1997:188). There is an obvious discrepancy between her manner in the playful exchange with Dr. Herdal and the poise she adopts when talking to Solness. Helland interprets this as a staging of a series of *tableaux vivants* which fits in with the meta-dramatic character of the play,

and by which Solness is increasingly beguiled (1997:193). I think this type of manipulation also emphasises her childishness – appearing consistent is of no importance, as long as she gets what she wants. Solness, for his part, is always ready to interpret signs so that they fit into his conception of things, and is not averse to steering the conversation in the direction he desires. He first lets “his eyes rest on her” before he talks about the Viking spirit, thus clearly expecting some reaction from Hilde. One may argue that Hilde has deliberately enticed this return to a “robust conscience”, but Solness produced this image of his own account, therefore making him complicit, though it is uncertain to which extent. This scene just shows how difficult it has become to distinguish motives and their origins at by time; Hilde and Solness are both playing an erotic game, and it is not always possible to say who has the upper hand. Hilde’s actions here seems calculated to achieve her aim of seeing Solness climb the tower of the new house as he once climbed the steeple at Lysanger. Everything she does appears highly theatrical in nature, and as such she is “performing” a series of parts for Solness. Therefore I do not agree with Østerud view of Hilde as being enticed by Solness’s understanding of the world where she gets “caught in *his* labyrinth of false interpretations” (2002:68, orig. emphasis). I think he is at least as much caught up in the labyrinth of memories, promises and demands Hilde gradually lures him into as she is enticed by his theory of the “special, chosen people” who can make their wishes come true since they know how to call on the “helpers and servers”. In my view, it is also significant that right after Solness decides to accept her memories as the true (or true enough) version of events, she remarks, “I did get it out of you in the end!” (p. 808). In the original, the element of enticement contained in this remark is even stronger: “Nå, ser De at jeg fik *lokket* det ud af Dem tilslut!” (XII, p. 61, my emphasis).

McAuley observes how the actor onstage signifies in at least three ways simultaneously, since it is both the physical presence of the actor in a space, the character that the actor presents that exists in the minds of the spectators through the performance, and a third “stage figure”, which consists of the persona (body of actor, costume, makeup, gesture etc) used in the production (1999:94). If this is seen as a performance within the text, the main problem with interpreting Hilde’s (and to a certain extent Solness’s) behaviour here lies in the difficulty of determining to what degree Hilde overlaps with Hilde-as-actor and Hilde-as-stage-figure. As so often in *The Master Builder*, it has become almost impossible to determine what is “real” and what play-acting. The next image that is evoked, namely that of building castles in the air, underlines the perplexing nature the dialogue has taken. Solness’s addition of “solid foundations” just makes the image even more complex. This image is however one I do not want to discuss now, since it is treated in some detail below and in the following chapters.

The last use of space in the play I want to discuss in detail here is the very last scene, in which Hilde, Ragnar, Dr. Herdal, Aline and the visiting ladies are standing on the veranda and looking across to the new house, where a figure, whom they soon recognise to be Solness, is climbing the scaffolding in order to wreath the house. Here, the continuity between the current and the new houses is strengthened by the fact that at the end of the play all attention is fixed on the new house. Because the new house is situated close to where Aline’s childhood home was, that house is also evoked as Solness climbs the tower (this is especially due to the particular attention given their proximity in the second act, as detailed above). Still more pertinently evoked is the attempt at the direct repetition of the feat Solness accomplished ten

years ago at Lysanger. Now the image of Solness reaching the top of the church steeple is literally conflated with his second attempt. This is not only because the two are so clearly associated by Hilde, but also because Solness proposes to get to the top of the tower to speak to God again, as he says he did ten years ago. Additionally, Hilde snatches up Aline's white shawl and cries out "Hurray for master builder Solness" (p. 859), just as she recounts doing ten years ago as a girl at Lysanger. Solness's remark in the first act that he almost fell because of the screams of "one of those little devils in white" (p. 805) does not prevent her from doing the same again, even though she has by this time heard from various people, including Solness, of his vertigo. At the same time, this tower is also now associated with Hilde's castle which "must stand up — very high up — and free on every side" (p. 847) and the castles in the air with solid foundations she and Solness just talked about. The idea of foundations may be directly reflected in the image of the stone quarry under the tower into which Solness falls. In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard discusses the polarity of the house, with the attic and the cellar forming its two poles (1994:18-20). In the third act of *The Master Builder* this polarity is extended to stretch from the tomb Hilde metaphorically descends into during her conversation with Aline, to the top of the tower on the new house, the castles in the air, and a conversation with God. As many critics have pointed out, there is a constant upward movement here,³⁷ which for Solness is abruptly reversed with his fall, whilst Hilde remains fixed on the height he has reached, seemingly oblivious of what has happened.

This moment has attracted some strange criticism, most notably perhaps from Gray who cites the stage direction indicating some of the scaffolding falling down with

³⁷ See for example Johnston's extensive analysis of the play in *The Ibsen Cycle*.

Solness as evidence that he does not fall because of his vertigo, the distraction of Hilde's waving, or because God took revenge, but because someone has maliciously tampered with the scaffolding, or it has broken by coincidence (1977:160-1).³⁸ To me, this interpretation seems quite far-fetched. Indicating that some parts of the scaffolding accompany the "indistinctly seen" human body which falls down seems to me merely a sensible realistic stage direction, since it is highly unlikely that someone could fall such a distance without falling through some of the scaffolding at some stage. Significantly, though, he falls on the way down – I think this signifies that although a measure of freedom may be achieved by means of the fantastical and by attempting the impossible, its implementation in quotidian reality can hardly succeed. As Solness falls, a strange immobility takes hold of most of the characters. Aline faints right after Solness falls, while Hilde "stares fixedly upward and speaks as if petrified" and Ragnar says that he "can't move" (p. 859). The only one of the main characters who seems relatively unaffected is Dr. Herdal, who "rushes down below" immediately after the fall (*loc. cit.*).

2.2.5 The progressive nature of the settings of the three acts

Johnston emphasises the three scene changes of the play, remarking that "Ibsen never changes his scenes without a definite purpose" and that in *Hedda Gabler*, one scene is kept for four acts (1975:263). I started this chapter by arguing that the progression from indoors to outdoors in *The Master Builder* is not only relevant to this play, but

³⁸ He continues to argue: "All that stands firm is the fact that Solness did not break under his self-imposed task. So much Ibsen clearly intended. Yet to convey that in terms of stage production is a practical impossibility. Ibsen's craftsmanship is the real failure in this ending, his inability to state his conclusion except through the vain expectation that the audience may see the poles and planks, far upstage, distinguish them from the falling body, and grasp their significance. He was asking more than any stage-manager could provide" (Gray 1977:161). I do not think such a polemical stance of much worth for any true attempt at interpreting the play.

also something which happens on a larger scale, in Ibsen's work as a whole. In his interpretation of the play, Johnston also emphasises the passage of time as it finds expression in the settings, especially since it is close to sunset in the last act, which ties in with his mythopoetical reading of Solness's fall. Johnston also identifies a gradual, but insistent reintegration of the male protagonists and their worlds in the last four plays, which he sees as manifesting both spatially and temporally; in the upwards movement which starts with the tower of *The Master Builder* and ends with the mountain peak of *When We Dead Awaken*, in the seasons the plays are set in (a progression from autumn to summer) and in the time of day at which the last act of each of these dramas is played out (from evening, to just before sunrise) (1975:138-9). Johnston argues that the

...progressive movement of the major *character* is continued and amplified in a *scenic* progress, the three scenes representing three very different visual commentaries upon the action and creating a context which enables us to "place" the action. (...) The absence of natural light [in Act I] suggests a tomb-like confinement of the spirit appropriate to the action and dialogue that follows. Act II...visually indicates release from the confinement of Act I, a movement of the spirit outward and upward; while Act III continues this movement...

(1975:258-9)

He sees Hilde's movement as the opposite of this, from freedom to confinement "as she takes upon herself more and more of the killing knowledge of the Solness household" which culminates in what he sees as her symbolic death at the beginning of the last act, which is in turn followed by a resurrection (*loc. cit.*). Although I do agree with this interpretation to a certain extent, I do not agree with Johnston's reading which places Solness in the "upper world" (at the top of the tower) and Hilde in the "lower world" (looking up from below to the tower) at the end of the play (1975:260). This does not fully take account of the fact that Solness does indeed fall from the tower and that at the end of the play Hilde is ecstatically crying out,

seemingly unaware of his fall. At that moment, these positions are reversed – Solness has fallen into the quarry, while Hilde has seen what she so insisted on in speaking to Ragnar – “I *will* see it! I *will* and I *must* see it!” (p. 851, orig. emphasis) – and she has seen *only* that; Solness’s fall and death occur without her even appearing to notice.

As I discussed in some detail above, the play starts in the conventionally realistic setting of an Ibsen drama and the action to a degree belies this realistic setting. The setting does not in actual fact get less realistic as such through the three acts, but the dialogue does, and, as I have tried to show, the setting visually illustrates at least some of the dialogue, since it provides some of the imagery relating to the retold memories (especially the tower on the new house which evokes the church steeple at Lysanger). Yet, even though the setting complements the dialogue in certain ways, it is also strongly juxtaposed to the obscure nature of the conversations. It is for instance in the relative openness of the veranda where Hilde learns that Aline’s true grief is for her lost possessions and dolls, not for her children. And, even though the increasingly fanciful and escapist nature of the dialogue is positive to a degree, it undeniably ends in death for Solness. In a way then, or at least in the case of Solness, reality reasserts itself at the end of the play, when he cannot completely carry through the achievement of the impossible – while he *did* reach the top of the tower, he has to get down again in order to incorporate this achievement meaningfully in his life, or, on an even more basic level, he has to get down again to be alive so that he can continue on the path he has chosen. I think, therefore, that the inner spaces of the characters show an opposite progression to the outer space as represented in the setting. Whilst it progressively gets lighter and there is a visual move from confinement to open space, the characters and what they reveal about themselves get progressively darker. They also turn more

and more to their innermost thoughts and wishes. So, whilst the “surface action” is moved from the inside to the outside, the dialogue or “inner action” has moved further into the realm of the metaphorical. Barranger argues,

The use of space-in-setting complements the spatial relationships among the characters. Just as the protagonist moves progressively within a widening horizon of space (from office to tower), so his spatial relationship with the other characters narrows inversely. From the Act I grouping of Solness, his associates, wife, and Hilde, these relationships become concentrically reduced until Solness is alone on the tower and dies in a spiralling motion.

(1972:180)

Even though I do agree that a certain inversion takes place, Barranger’s conclusion certainly does not take account of the fact that Solness in many ways is *as* or even more alone at the start of the play than at its end. In the first act he not only isolates himself by the warning that one should not listen to what he says, but he also suspects everyone else of doubting his sanity, even though that is clearly not the case. All his relationships at the start of the play are also merely play-acting to some degree. By the end of the play, Solness surely views the climbing of the tower as a necessary ritual to be completed before he can embark on the next phase in his career, namely the building of castles in the air *with* Hilde. Even if this relationship is also not built on the firmest of foundations, to him it must appear to be surer than the relationships he has at the outset of the play, in order to make the risk worthwhile. I think this can be argued with some certainty, since he does not jump from the tower, but falls. Barranger also does not take in account the fact that Solness is not even present on stage at the moment of his death. Even though he dies alone, this is mediated through the descriptions and reactions of the other characters. Similarly, as Helland notes, a move takes place in which the private play between Hilde and Solness becomes a public performance, and as such the public sphere invades their private relationship (1997:233). This contrast is greatest in the final scene, where everyone witnesses this

very private attempt of Solness to climb as high as he builds. His failure to do so, on a realistic level, means that Ragnar and the other young men who came to watch the wreathing of the building are now free to take Solness's place, as he feared would happen. This happens quite literally when "the crowd in the street breaks the fence and storms into the garden" (p. 859) after Solness has fallen; something Northam describes as the invasion of Solness's domain by the next generation (1953:183). Yet, as if to underline how ironically groundless Solness's fear of Ragnar had been, he remains rooted to the spot on the veranda, unable to move.

Interestingly enough, an even more drastic progression takes place in what Hilde claims Solness has promised her. Because this concerns the progression from a kingdom called Orangia to the eventual suggestion that they build castles in the air, this progression is also spatial in nature, and makes out part of the atmospheric, metaphoric or symbolical setting of the play. This progression I discuss in more detail in the following chapters. Likewise, some other types of progression may also be noted, mostly in connection with a type of progressive repetition in the play. These I discuss in the next chapter, where I look at the repetitiveness of *The Master Builder* in more detail.

Chapter 3

The uncanny imagery of *The Master Builder*

The Metaphor: THE HOUSE.

What it generates: STABILITY.

Universe as house: Rooms in one mansion.

Society as household: Division within unity; inclusion/exclusion.

Person as householder: Selfhood.

Medicine as protection.

Mind as householder: Belonging.

Language as self-domestication.

The relationship of human with other beings in the house: Inside/Outside.

Images of the House: Doors, windows, hearth, home, the town.

— Ursula le Guin¹

We are all haunted houses.

— H.D.²

In this short chapter I discuss the significance of the abundance of architectural and building-related imagery in the play. In fact, I argue that a discussion of houses and building pervades the entire play and can be said to comprise most of the imagery of *The Master Builder*. Dines Johansen asserts that “*The Master Builder* is about space both in a narrow sense, architectural space, and in a wider one, namely about the dialectic and clash between imaginary spaces and real world space” (2002:134). In this chapter I discuss both the image of the house and the way in which it relates to the uncanny unhomeliness of modernity. Imagery is to a certain extent reliant on repetition, and therefore I first discuss the phenomenon of repetition in the play in a more general sense. Before discussing the repeated words and images of *The Master Builder*, I take a brief look at the notion of the uncanny and the importance of

¹ From “Some Generative Metaphors” in *Always Coming Home* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1986), p. 484.

² (Hilda Doolittle), *Tribute to Freud*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985), p. 146.

repetition in engendering an atmosphere of uncanniness. This in turn connects with the discussion of the pervasiveness of memory and dreams in the play in the next chapter.

3.1 The uncanny nature of repetition

The notion of the uncanny as it is used in criticism today has its roots in Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny"), which in turn drew on Ernst Jentsch's "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen", published in 1908. In this essay, Freud describes the uncanny as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (2003:124). Through a detailed etymological discussion, Freud traces the way in which the German word *heimlich* (lit. "homely") in some cases "merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*" (2003:132). This happens in the sense of the word *heimlich* in which it means "concealed" or "hidden". Nicholas Royle describes the uncanny as

...a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin *proprius*, 'own'), a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names, one's so-called 'own' name, but also the proper names of others, of places, institutions and events. It is a crisis of the natural touching upon everything that one might have thought was 'part of nature': one's own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. But the uncanny is not simply an experience of strangeness and alienation. More specifically, it is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar.

(2003:1)

One of the most fundamental manifestations of the uncanny, then, would be when the home itself somehow becomes unfamiliar or frightening. As I argue below, this is the most overt instance of the uncanny in *The Master Builder*. Yet, there are also other

manifestations of the uncanny in the play, most notably perhaps in the repetitive nature of the play. Something is of course not uncanny just by virtue of being repeated, but sometimes a repetition may engender a feeling of uneasiness as the familiar becomes unfamiliar, something Freud especially identifies with the figure of the *Doppelgänger*. Anthony Vidler identifies a more general sense of uncanny repetition in the nineteenth century, by which a

...sense of estrangement was intellectually reinforced by the disturbingly transient qualities of the twin foundations of certainty for the nineteenth century – history and nature. The uncanny habit of history to repeat itself, to return at unexpected and unwanted moments; the stubborn resistance of nature to the assimilation of human attributes and its tragic propensity to inorganic isolation, seemed, for many, to confirm the impossibility of ‘living comfortably’ in the world.

(1992:5)

Moreover, because of the conventional nature of theatre and performance, and especially because of the relationship between the text and its “repetition” on the stage Marvin Carlson identifies repetition in the form of haunting as a fundamental aspect of theatre and argues:

All theatrical cultures have recognized, in some form or another, this ghostly quality, this sense of something coming back in the theatre, and so the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex. Just as one might say that every play might be called *Ghosts*, so, with equal justification, one might argue that every play is a memory play.

(2001:2)

Likewise, Peter Brook asserts that an important characteristic of the theatre is that it “always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This is also what can make it so disturbing” (1968:99). The importance of memory and dreams in *The Master Builder* is something I return to in more detail in the next chapter.

In her article “Repetition, return, and doubling in Henrik Ibsen’s major prose plays” Lis Møller argues that Ibsen’s dramas do not only create meaning by repetition, but also contain another type of repetition, which “challenges and dissolves the meaning we thought to have found” (2001:25). Taking the example of the sun in *Ghosts*, she argues that through repetition a type of dehumanisation takes place, which is also a form of de-symbolisation which, at the end of the play, reduces the symbol (sun) to a mere signifier, or an empty sign (2001:25-6). This type of repetition, in which the by now familiar repeated element becomes something alienating and unfamiliar is then an instance of the uncanny. In my view, something similar happens in *The Master Builder*, where Hilde has gotten so obsessed by the original climbing of the tower, an event to which she has apparently been clinging for ten years, that by the end of the play she is completely detached from the repetition of the event, and refuses to see Solness falling to his death, instead still ecstatically celebrating his ascent to the top of the tower, as she remembers it. Here the reality of the tower and Solness’s fall has become completely effaced by the act of repetition and what that evokes. This seems to correspond to Freud description of the uncanny effect that is engendered

...when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes...

(2003:150)

3.2 Repetition in *The Master Builder*

In *The Master Builder* repetition forms a fundamental part of the action and dialogue of the play, in that so much of the conversation centres on the recounting of memories and dreams. Møller describes repetition as “located on the borderline between

representation and structure” and concludes that in Ibsen repetition is “fundamentally ambiguous” (2001:13, 30).³ In *The Master Builder*, much of this ambiguity originates in my view in the uncanny associations some of the repeated images carry, as well as in the dubious sources of many of the words and images which are repeated (i.e. the dreams, memories and interpretations by characters who can already not fully be trusted, combined with the pervading theatricality of the play). Møller views reappearance and recurrence not just an aspect, also as recurring theme in its own right in *The Master Builder*, and connects this to the portrayal of the past and its continuing influence on the present, where characters are caught in repetitive patterns and compulsive actions, whilst haunted by figures from the past (2001:11). She sees the scene in the first act where Hilde apparently recalls the events at Lysanger with Solness’s unbelieving repetition and eventual acceptance of her memories as a problematising of repetition (2001:20-22). I do not, however, think it that important for the reader to know if the memories Hilde recounts are those of actual events – the constant ambivalence about the truth of her memories mirrors the doubtfulness which exists about everything Solness says, which I discussed at some length in the previous chapter. As such, it could be said to constitute a type of thematic repetition in itself, which enhances the fantastic character of the play. Interestingly, Møller goes to great lengths to prove that it is not a given fact that Solness indeed did climb that tower, citing as evidence that Hilde brings forth all the information, that she was the only eyewitness to the event in the play, that Ragnar has only heard about it, and that Mrs Solness absolute denies it ever taking place, and that Solness’s own recollection is vague (2001:21 *et seq.*). Labouring this seems to me to weaken her argument, rather

³ She argues that “repetition semiotifies” and as such “creates meaningful signs and symbols. But at the same time the repetition in Ibsen’s prose plays produces a ‘signs against signs’-structure, where we can no longer decide what status and function repetition has, even though the interpretation of the entire drama is dependent on this decision” (2001:24).

than to support it: within the fictional world of the play, the mere fact that Ragnar knows the Master Builder *did* climb one of his towers once, indicates that at least that part of Hilde's recollection is quite accurate. It is also the part of her memory Solness accept most readily. Further, by stressing that the first climbing of the tower may not have been real, Møller undermines the repetitive climbing of another *real* tower at the end of the play, which leads to Solness's death.

Møller notes a pattern of repetition in Ibsen's work as a whole, something which also underlies much of the reasoning of Brian Johnston's interpretations of Ibsen. Here she identifies the theme of "a promise made lightly to a young woman, who after a number of years returns and demands that the promise be kept" (2001:11) in *The Master Builder*, which she also notes in *When We Dead Awaken* where Maja and Irene similarly demand fulfilment of a promise. Even though Møller discusses *The Master Builder* in some detail in the light of repetition both within the play and in Ibsen's oeuvre, she does not mention that the character of Hilde Wangel is itself a repetition within Ibsen's corpus: she is the only one of his characters to appear under the same name in a second play. Hilde seems therefore to be associated on a more primary level with the device of repetition. To me this seems quite significant, in that it extends her fictional background to *The Lady from the Sea*. On the one hand, when Ibsen's oeuvre is viewed as a whole, therefore, she is already firmly established as otherworldly, in the sense of being thoroughly fictional with an established fictional background. On the other hand, her fictionality is also more real than that of the other characters, in that, though she appears completely out of the blue, much of her "history" can be found in *The Lady from the Sea*. Atle Kittang remarks,

...samstundes kjem Hilde Wangel frå eit anna av Ibsens skodespel, nemleg
Fruen fra havet. Ibsen lar med andre ord ein figur frå sitt eige fiksjonsunivers

dukke opp att i dramaet om byggmeister Solness. Og det er absolutt verdt å merke seg at denne figuren opphavleg høyrer heime i eit drama der *konflikten mellom røyndomsforplikting og dragnaden ut mot det fantastiske* er sjølve grunntemaet.

(1979:109, orig. emphasis)

Kittang continues to observe that Hilde does not belong to the conflicts of *The Master Builder* and, additionally, also brings the fantasy principle, which he sees as the main theme of *The Lady from the Sea*, to the play (1979:110). As such he sees Hilde as acting as a catalyst, by confirming and encouraging Solness's tendency to mythologise his life and self-understanding (*loc. cit.*). Esslin remarks in connection with *The Lady from the Sea* that "the part of the Stranger, that giver of a false and destructive self-image to Ellida is, in another play, *The Master Builder*, played by Ellida's own step-daughter – Hilda Wangel" (1980:77). This is an interesting example of repetition in the play in quite another sense than the reiteration of words and images.⁴

Imagery in itself is of course to a certain extent dependent on repetition, as it is the repeated use of a specific image which gives it much of its power. In *The Master Builder*, much of the imagery can be traced back to Solness's trade. The conversation is dominated by references to different structures, or "houses" in the broadest sense of the word. Most conspicuous are the three houses of the Solness family – the house in which Aline grew up, their current home, in which the play is set and the new house with the tower that is just about finished when the play starts.⁵ Then there are the

⁴ Something which needs to be briefly noted, and to which I will return in the next chapter, is that the word most repeated in the play seems to be "aldrig" – never.

⁵ Sandberg notes that despite all the attention given in criticism to the house that burned down and the new house which is being built that "in some ways, though, the master builder's present home is the most crucial space. It is the one he actually inhabits, the position from which all other possibilities of home are judged and evaluated. Solness's present home, the middle term of a triad of dwellings, is the home of the subject caught between loss and potential, a kind of partial compensation; in short, the home of a subject like all of us." (2001:45-6)

frequent references to the church steeple Solness built and climbed at Lysanger, the tower of the castle Hilde at first insists on as part of the kingdom promised her, the new house that the young couple wants to build at Løvstrand and finally the castles in the air which Hilde calls “the most beautiful thing in the world” (p. 848). I focussed on the current home as setting of the play in the previous chapter. Here I look more generally at the problematics surrounding the building of homes for human beings and the uncanny implications this carries in the play, while I look more closely at the imagery surrounding the promise Hilde claims in the next chapter.

3.3 “Houses for people” vs. “Homes for human beings”

Perhaps quite naturally, Solness shows a strong predilection for describing things in terms of building; he sees his entire life in the light of his occupation. As a young man “the building of churches seemed to [him] the noblest thing [he] could do with [his] life” (p. 853) and he casts himself in the mould of the artist who had to sacrifice everything for the sake of his art and as such was “only to be a master builder” (p. 854). Further, he asserted his break with the God who demanded such complete devotion by deciding to “be a free creator” (*loc. cit.*) and build “homes for human beings”. At the end of the play, he describes the latest turn his life had taken by maintaining that he has just embarked on a new building project of “the one thing human beings can be happy in” (p. 855), namely the castles in the air he and Hilde have been talking about. He also, mistakenly, as it turns out, believes that Aline “had a talent for building too (...) for building up the souls of children” (p. 826-7). In this regard, it is also interesting to note the architectural metaphor he uses to describe the threat of the younger generation, which will come “thundering at the door” (p. 811). Therefore it seems also quite in character that Solness tends to measure happiness

in *homes*. In fact, Aline seems to do much the same, in her insistent clinging to her childhood home and the possessions and memories it contained. Aline's strange behaviour in connection with the burned down house may at least figuratively be connected to Sennett's observation on the relationship between the idea of the home as a sanctuary and psychological development,

The coming of the Industrial Revolution brought with all its horrors a strong need for secular sanctuary. But the ideal of the sanctuary is rooted, in Western culture, in something more than physical protection. Sanctuary seems to offer, as we would now say, the possibility of psychological development...

(1990:24)

Aline's psychological development seems to have come to a complete halt: she admits to still playing with her dolls even after her marriage and appears more concerned about the dresses and dolls that were lost in the fire than about the fact that her children died, probably at least in part as a consequence of her obsession with the lost possessions (p.103).

Throughout *The Master Builder*, there is a constant contrast between "house" and "home". This is already introduced right at the beginning of the first act, when Solness and Brovik discuss the house the young couple wants to build at Løvstrand. Even before Solness has learnt that they would like him to "give up on the commission" (p. 789) and approve the plans Ragnar had drawn so that they can start building, Solness responds quite violently to their anxiousness to get building:

BROVIK (ser op). For de går og længter så urimelig efter at få flytte ind i sit eget, sa' de.

SOLNESS. Ja vel; ja vel. En kender det! Og så tar de det slig, som det bedst kan falde sig. Får sig så'n en — en bolig. Et slags tilholdssted bare. Men ikke noget hjem. Nej mange tak! La' dem så heller vende sig til en anden. Sig dem det når de kommer igen.

(XII, p. 35)

Thus the theme of the difference between houses and homes is introduced very early in the play. In the same scene another, related key concept is also introduced, namely that of *strangers*:

BROVIK. Folkene er solide nok. Ragnar kender dem. Hun vanker i familjen.

Svært solide folk.

SOLNESS. Å, solide, — solide! Det er jo sletikke det, jeg mener. Herregud, forstår ikke De mig heller nu? (hæftig.) Jeg vil ikke ha' noget med de fremmede mennesker at skaffe. La' dem vende sig til hvem de vil for mig!

(*loc. cit.*)

This entire scene of course undermines Solness's stated goal to build "homes for human beings" long before he comes to tell about it for the first time. Even though he makes such a big distinction between houses and homes, he inevitably has to build for strangers too. Yet, in this scene, he appears to treat his potential clients with contempt. Solness, however, is not the only character of the play that seems afraid or suspicious of strangers. Later in the play Hilde returns to the notion of "strangers". In the first act she refers to the other people who came in after Solness kissed her as "de andre fremmede" (XII, p. 61). In the last act, Aline describes the houses Solness had built after subdividing the garden:

FRU SOLNESS. ...Tænk, — de har stykket ud, — og bygget huse for fremmede mennesker. Folk, som jeg ikke kender. Og de kan sidde og sé på mig inde fra vinduene.

(XII, p. 101)

Here, the difference between houses and homes is again reiterated. And after this conversation with Aline, Hilde shows the first signs that her conscience may not be all that robust after all, when she says that she cannot hurt somebody whom she does not know, although she would not have much scruples about hurting a stranger. It should also be noted that all these references to strangers are quite ambiguous. Solness seems to assume that because he does not know the people who want to build at

Løvstrand, they are strangers, and therefore he wants nothing to do with them, and cannot build them a home. Yet, when Hilde enters his house completely unexpectedly, he does not remember her from ten years before, but nevertheless accepts her memories of the events at Lysanger to be true, or as good as true, after only talking to her for a few moments. This would indicate a completely opposite attitude to strangers, if it suits him. And Hilde, who is the stranger in the house, fits into it as though she had been destined to – she sleeps in the middle nursery as if she was a baby. Aline despises the strangers who can see in on her from their houses, yet she prefers doing her duty towards the visiting ladies in the last act, rather than to try and dissuade her husband from climbing the tower. As discussed in the previous chapter, the current Solness home and garden are in effect completely overrun by strangers in the last scenes of the play. This is something which started with their giving a room to Hilde, and ends in the ladies on the veranda, and the strangers in the garden, who all witness Solness's fall from the tower.

Hilde seems unable to see the virtue of Solness's desire to build homes for human beings. In the second act an interesting exchange takes place between them, in which this difference between their conceptions of Solness's work is highlighted:

SOLNESS. ...Fra den dag, jeg misted dem, bygged jeg nødig kirker.

HILDE. Kanske ikke gerne kirketårnet oppe hos oss heller?

SOLNESS. Ikke gerne. Jeg véd, hvor glad og let jeg var da det tårnet stod færdig.

HILDE. Det véd jeg også.

SOLNESS. Og nu bygger jeg aldrig — aldrig sligt noget mere! Hverken kirker eller kirketårne.

HILDE (nikker langsomt). Bare huse, som der kan bo folk i.

SOLNESS. *Hjem for mennesker*, Hilde.

HILDE. Men hjem med høje tårne og spir på.

SOLNESS. Helst det...

(XII, p. 80-1, my emphasis)

Solness tells Hilde how he had to pay for the right to build homes for human beings with his own hope to ever have a happy home. This happened because Aline's childhood home burned down, and in this way all the potential for their personal happiness had been destroyed. This is a view shared by Aline, who repeatedly condemns Solness's idea that they may be happier in the new home:

FRU SOLNESS (udbrydende i klage). Du kan bygge så meget, du i verden vil, Halvard,
— for mig får du aldrig bygget noget rigtigt hjem op igen!

(...)

SOLNESS (knuger hænderne og går henover gulvet). Å, det er da også fortvilet, er det!
Aldrig en solstråle! Ikke så meget som et streiflyv engang ind i
hjemmet!

FRU SOLNESS. Her er jo ikke noget hjem, Halvard.

SOLNESS. Å nej, du må så sige. (tungt.) Og gud véd om du ikke får ret i det, at
det ikke blir bedre for os i det nye huset heller.

FRU SOLNESS. Det blir det aldrig. Lige tomt. Lige øde. Der som her.

(XII, p. 71-2)

Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, Solness himself perpetuates the emptiness of their home by replicating the empty nurseries in the new house he is building. Sennett notes that

During the course of the nineteenth century, interior domestic designs more and more separated the members of families and hid away the necessities of the body inside the house. The house had its own division between public and private areas...

(1990:26)

The empty nurseries in his current home (which he replicates in the new one, whilst knowing that they will never be used) are constant reminders of how brutal this modern tendency to separate and compartmentalise can be. This separation of the family members in the modern house seems to doom Solness's wish to build true homes for people (or for himself) to disappointment right from the start. As noted, Ibsen's stage directions at the start of the third act vividly reflect the failure of this project: "udenfor gårderne en gade med *lave, forfaldne* småhuse" (XII p.100, my

emphasis). Even more sure than the failure of the project to provide people with homes is Solness's failure to give himself a new, happy home – climbing the high tower of his new house causes his death, and the new house is in effect nothing more than a tombstone. Even if some happiness appears for a fleeting moment to be seated in the utopian castles in the air that Solness and Hilde plan to build, this ideal is also thwarted by Solness's death, and may even be said to have directly led to his fall from the tower. This is a point to which I return in the next chapter.

A failure to have a real home seems a particularly modern condition and the failure of Solness's idealist projects (first building churches, then building homes for people and lastly climbing the tower in order to embark on the building of castles in the air) is indicative of the modernist character of the play, if one follows Toril Moi's argument that "to become a modernist is not to reject realism; it is to reject idealism" (2006:111). All the drastic changes that took place during modernity caused a radical break with the traditional view of the home. This was manifested in the very form the modern home took. Richard Sennett sees the distinctive shift from the exterior to the interior in the nineteenth century as especially relevant: "'home' became the secular version of spiritual refuge; the geography of safety shifted from a sanctuary in the urban center to the domestic interior" (1990:21). This move can also clearly be seen in *The Master Builder*, as Solness describes the trajectory his career followed to Hilde:

SOLNESS. Nej. Jeg bygger ingen kirketårne nu mere. Og ingen kirker heller.

HILDE. Hvad bygger De nu da?

SOLNESS. Hjem for mennesker.

(XII, p. 64)

This project of building homes for human beings in modernity seems particularly idealistic and even nostalgic. In his article on the relationship between the nationalist

project of folk museums and architecture as it is used in Ibsen's work, Mark Sandberg observes that:

The changing perceptions of space and time in modernity created a widely shared assumption that the traditional sense of home had been put out of reach. The reactions to this perceived loss of grounding varied widely, of course. For some the loss was inconsolable; for others it was perhaps a relief or liberation. But there was a general sense in the period that whatever the traditional home was, it was gone or on the verge of disappearing.

(2001:32)

The quotation from Ursula le Guin with which the chapter opens, articulates the values associated with the home and homeliness. According to Nicholas Royle, one manifestation of the uncanny, occurs when one discovers something fundamentally "unhomely" at the heart of the home, or when the sense of homeliness is uprooted (2003:1). This is certainly the case for both Halvard and Aline, and the empty nurseries appear as a physical manifestation of the unhomeliness at the heart of their household. The contrast between the way in which the old house appeared from the outside and how it was on the inside is also uncanny in this context:

SOLNESS. ...Det var en stor, styg, mørk trækasse at sé til udvendig. Men nokså lunt og hyggeligt inde alligevel.

(XII, p. 79)

Despite all of Solness's efforts to build "snug cozy, sunlit homes" for families, he could never recapture the happiness of the wooden house that burned down, however dreary it looked from the outside.⁶ Aline expresses this unfamiliarity of their home when she talks about the garden which has "grown so strange" to her. The old house which looked so lacklustre and perhaps even haunted (and thus *unheimlich* or uncanny) from the outside was homely on the inside. Yet, uncannily, the light, happy home Solness has tried to build is fundamentally *unheimlich* or unhomely on the

⁶ Sandberg notes about Aline's ancestral home, "The house, like the mixed bag of inheritance that it represents, as at once both oppressive and cozy, *unheimlich* on the outside and *heimlich* on the inside, and its destruction correspondingly brings both relief and regret to Solness." (2001:44). Unsettlingly, the inverse of this seems to be replicated in the homes he tried to build for human beings.

inside, not least because of its feature of substantialised emptiness in the shape of the three nurseries Solness so determinedly repeats. Thus, the uncanny in the shape of the automaton (as seen in Aline's obsession with her dolls), the uncanny in the form of death, the uncanny in the form of the compulsion to repeat, the uncanny in the feature of concealment and the uncanny in the characteristic of unhomeliness here come together in the image of the nurseries.

By the end of the play, Solness have realised that homes cannot be built for human beings. He asks "who knows if there'll be any use for such homes in the future" (p. 846) and later concludes:

SOLNESS. ...Menneskene har ikke brug for disse her hjemmene sine. Ikke for at være lykkelige, ikke. Og jeg vilde heller ikke havt brug for så'nt et hjem. Ifald jeg havde ejt noget...

(XII, p. 118)

Kittang also notes that for all the emphasis he places on the homely, Solness relies heavily on the uncanny in order to justify his calling:

Å bygge heimar for menneska blir dermed i sin kjerne eit paradoks, sedan det er ved å gå i teneste hos dei "heimlege" verdiane at Solness verkeleggjer sine inste, høgst "uheimlege" draumar: ønsket og overtydinga om å vere eit gudbenåda unntaksmenneske. Kanskje er det fordi han innser dette paradokset as han nå er komen i den kritiske situasjonen der også bygginga av heimar er blitt meiningslaus for han?

(2002:260)

Interestingly, Vidler sees the uncanny as a "metaphor for a fundamentally unliveable modern condition" (1992:x). Hilde, as opposed to Solness, appears to have completely come to terms with the fact that having a real home is impossible in modernity. She has not only left her father's home for good, she also describes it as a cage. She arrives at the Solness house without a suitcase, money or any definite plans and in hiking clothes; effectively a vagrant. Her refusal to speak of homes in positive

terms underlines this attitude. Rønning identifies the difference between a modern sensibility and a pre-modern one in the different ways in which Solness and Hilda uses mythical imagery:

His represents a mythical form of thinking with roots in an old society, where fate rules the destiny of the individual. Hers represent a form where the individual make [*sic*] use of mythical imagery to express private fantasies, that are linked to her individual personality. Hilde is depicted as a high-strung young and irrational young woman, but she is truly modern.

(1994b:61)

Although I do not disagree with this depiction of Hilde, I think her modern qualities find an even more overt expression in her view that a real home no longer exists and her subsequent recourse to “castles in the air”. Sandberg notes about Hilde, and the other characters in Ibsen who enter space from the outside to inhabit it temporally, that

The interest lies precisely in what such characters do with that space, how their autonomy from the space allows them to forward models of inhabitation unavailable to the structure’s more ‘proper’ inhabitants. (...) It is a telling comment on Ibsen’s world-view, however, that this kind of deconstruction exists to the *side* of the main characters’ various projects. Solness dies for his architectural paradigm, with all its dead-end limitations, and Hilde’s metaphorical mode of habitation is given pathological associations; it does not emerge as a clear intellectual alternative to housing and unhousing. For Ibsen, the distance from irony to insanity is not great.

(2001:48)

In this respect it is also interesting to note Brynhildsvoll’s observation that the liberation of the inner space is hoped to come from outside in Ibsen (1993:36). Hilde comes literally from outside, but, as argued above, on another level she also seems to be outside the reality of the play, in that she is more closely associated with the fantastic or fictional than any of the other characters. In this regard it is also interesting to note Gaston Bachelard’s assertion that the house is a place where experienced daydreaming becomes part of new daydreaming when memories of

former houses are relived (1994:6). Hilde does not seem to have this connection with a home, yet she is unarguably the greatest dreamer of the play. To further complicate matters, she tends to dream in the prevailing architectural imagery of the play. This is perhaps another reason for her otherworldly presence in the play – even though she appears to feel contempt for the concept of a home, she can make herself at home more easily than the other main characters and, moreover, expresses her desires in terms of building, just as Solness does.

At the heart of the play, thus, despite the frequency of architectural imagery is the fact that “in the world depicted by *The Master Builder* no such thing as a home for human beings is conceivable” (Helland 1994:318). In this sense, much of the spatiality of the play is self-negatory and self-undermining in nature. Even though the play is set in a home, the atmosphere of homeliness is not so much negated as, for the greater part of the play, completely non-existent in *The Master Builder*. This is emphasised by Aline’s comment that “this is no home” (p. 817), which as such takes on meta-dramatic and deconstructive shades.

Chapter 4

Castles in the air: Memories, dreams and utopia in

The Master Builder

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

— T.S. Eliot¹

In this short chapter I briefly discuss the pervasiveness of memory and dreams and the utopian impulse of *The Master Builder*. As I argued in the previous chapters, the retelling of dreams and memories forms a substantial part of the structure of the play. Further, it also underscores its fantastic nature. Yet, all of this is set in a realistic setting, and as such there is a constant juxtaposition between the real and the fantastic in the play, which is never completely resolved. This is similar to the nature of performance itself, as discussed in the second chapter, in which there is a constant tension between the reality and fictionality of the event. In this chapter I want to explore this tension and the way in which it is depicted in the play, especially through the use of memory and dreams, and the spatial impact these have.

4.1 The changing promise

One of the interesting things about the promise Hilde claims Solness had made to her ten years ago to the day of her arrival, is the changing nature of what she alleges had been promised. At the end of the second chapter I briefly noted the progression which

¹ From *Burnt Norton*, the first part of the *Four Quartets* (1935), taken from the *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), p. 176.

takes place in this claim, and here I discuss this in more detail, especially in the light of the changing concept of utopia during modernity.

The word utopia² was coined in ca.1515 by Sir Thomas More (*Utopia* 1995:xxi). It is a combination of the Greek words “ou” (lit. “no”) and “topos” (“space”), thus literally meaning “no-place”. In the word there is also a suggestion of the Greek word “eu” (=good), so giving the term the possibility of being understood as “good-place” as well. Thus an interesting juxtaposition occurs in the term, as it is both a no-place and a good-place. But the “no” element in the term seems to negate and undermine it to a certain degree. Roland Schaer emphasises that the history of utopia begins with Thomas Moore, because, in contrast to previous “millenarian visions and eschatological promises” his vision does not call for divine intervention, nor does it rely on nature to free people from the burden of labour and utopians are still subject to their character traits and flaws (2000:3-4). As such, it appears as a peculiar outcome of early modernity. Over time, though, the utopian has shifted from a spatially dominated discourse, to a temporally dominated one.

In the literary utopias that abounded throughout the eighteenth century, space was at issue: utopia played with possible geographies, and utopians were essentially explorers. But then time became the principal arena for the staging of utopias. (...) Time travel became the prevalent form of the utopian novel in the last third of the nineteenth century... Utopia established itself as a prognostic genre, capable of anticipating a history that had yet to come; in no time, these anticipatory visions took on a vacillating quality as they altered between the dream and the nightmare, paradise and disaster, “eutopia” and “anti-utopia”.

(Schaer 2000:5)

² For an extensive overview of the prevalence of the utopian in Western culture, see for example the volume *Utopia: The search for the ideal society in the Western world*, edited by Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent (2000); full details to be found in the bibliography.

This shift from a spatial to a temporal concept also takes place on some level in the nature of the promise Hilde claims Solness made to her ten years ago. The image undergoes progression which is facilitated by its repetition. At every instance Hilde repeats her demands the image of what was promised undergoes a slight change. On her arrival, Hilde says Solness promised to “come back in ten years, like a troll, and carry [her] off — to Spain or someplace. And there [he] promised to buy [her] a kingdom” (p. 806). She then tells him that the kingdom was to be called Orangia (Appelsinia in Norwegian), but that she “didn’t like it all” because “it was as if [he was] out to make fun of [her]” (*loc. cit.*). A bit later, Hilde confesses that she is no longer interested in an “everyday, garden-variety kingdom” (p. 809) which she intensifies by saying: “I’m through with that stupid kingdom! I want a different one, completely” (p. 811). And when Solness answers that he could find a use for her, Hilde exclaims, “Then I have my kingdom!” (p. 812), just to add “*Almost* — that’s what I meant” (p. 813, orig. emphasis) mere moments later. In the second act, Hilde says that she has slept like a princess in the nursery, thus reiterating this fantastic promise of a kingdom from the night before. At the end of the second act, Solness remarks that Hilde should live in “the topmost room of the tower” of the new house, which she then says he promised (p. 838). In the last act, the quickest progression in the images connected to the promise takes place. Hilde now claims a castle as part of the promise, since no-one “ever heard of a kingdom without a castle” (p. 847). She wants the castle to be “free on every side” with a “terribly high tower” on which there will be a balcony from which she can look down (*loc.cit.*). Despite Solness’s obvious distress at the thought of standing so high, he asks if “the master builder [will] be allowed to come up to his princess” (p. 848). And Hilde then exclaims that in “that way [they’ll] build the loveliest — the most beautiful thing anywhere in the world”,

namely “castles in the air”, to which Solness adds the peculiar image of solid foundations (*loc. cit.*). This image starts out as spatial; in the childish fairytale kingdom Solness may or may not have promised Hilde ten years ago (the ultimatum also gives a temporal nature to the promise). By the end of the play, although the transformed promise is still temporal to a degree (the building of castles in the air is presumably to be commenced as soon as Solness completed the ritual ascent of the tower), it has completely transcended spatiality, except perhaps in Solness’s notion of “solid foundations”. The image of castles in the air is utopian in a very literal way, as it is both one of a no-place and one of a good-place. In the last section of this chapter I return to the notion of utopia as it manifests in Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, because I think it may give some basis for interpretation.

4.2 Memories

Closely bound up with the promise Hilde tells about, is the question of memory and its (un)reliability. Everist locates Ibsen’s ambivalence in the constant influence the past has on the present in his plays:

Ibsen’s brand of ambiguity is quite distinctive; it derives not from vagueness or a lack of information, but from an excessive wealth of competing specifics. There are so many details, variably remembered and variously employed, that the sense of a firm, fixed, and final reality in each tale tends to recede under closer scrutiny. Memory becomes an avalanche of the past that radically shifts the configuration of the present. My sense of what happens in an Ibsen play has more to do with how I feel about the various perspectives I encounter and which people I choose to believe than it does with verifiable findings of truth.

(2000:95)

Williams, in turn, sees Ibsen’s extensive use of memory in establishing his characters (as opposed to the use of action) as significant in the development of the relationship between the audience and the performance. He maintains that since

...characters became more complex and revealed their personalities through the non-linear medium of memory and as much of this revelation centres around symbols that were difficult to grasp, Ibsen seemed to be asking for more imaginative effort from his audience than any playwright prior to him had done

(1994:172)

As such, the omnipresence of memory in Ibsen may be seen as one of the contributing factors to moving his plays further from the theatre and into the realm of literature, which I discussed in some detail in the second chapter. Yet, Marvin Carlson also argues that memory is inherently part of the theatre and of the nature of performance, not just because the theatre has in the past functioned to some extent as the preserver of cultural memory in all cultures, but also because

...any theatrical production weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience, playing in various degrees and combinations with that audience's collective and individual memories of previous experience with this play, this director, these actors, this story, this theatrical space, even, on occasion, with this scenery, these costumes, these properties.

(2001:165)

Therefore, when the dialogue of a play and the impetus for its action are mostly founded on the often dubious memories of its characters, another layer of memory is added to the ones described above by Carlson. In *The Master Builder*, which is so decidedly meta-dramatic in nature, this effect is further compounded. Because of the pervasiveness of memories in *The Master Builder*, the past is constantly present in the play. In the previous chapters, I have discussed the way in which memories are spatially present, by way of the imagery (both in the dialogue and in the scenery). The way in which the memories are one by one recounted, also gives the play an episodic nature. Barranger interprets *The Master Builder* in terms of a “new structural device: the anecdote or narration of a ‘strange story’” and identifies five separate narrations in the play in this way, which all function in a similar way (1972:176). As I have argued in the previous chapter, the repetitive nature of the play also generates

some of its uncanniness – one forever gets the nagging feeling that the dialogue is taking on an already familiar, yet peculiarly strange tone.

In *The Master Builder* the line between memory and fantasy is often blurred, and the measure to which these overlap cannot be clearly discerned. This is especially emphasised by the repeated use of words related to remembering and forgetting, such as “glemsom”, “huske”, “glemme” and “minde” in the first act. In a typically meta-dramatic comment, Solness remarks that Hilde “must have dreamed” (p. 807) about the promised kingdom. At the end of the second act, this is articulated even more overtly:

HILDE (ubestemmeligt, mellem alvor og spøg). Ja, det har De jo lovet mig.

SOLNESS. Har jeg egentlig det?

HILDE. Fy, bygmester! De sa’ at jeg skulde bli’ prinsesse. Og at jeg skulde få et kongerige af Dem. Og så tog De og — Nå!

SOLNESS (varsomt). Er De ganske viss på at det ikke er så’n en drøm, — en indbildning, som har fæstnet sig hos Dem?

HILDE (hvast). For De gjorde det måske ikke?

SOLNESS. Véd knapt selv —. (sagtere.) Men dét ved jeg rigtignok nu, at jeg —

HILDE. At De —? Si’ det straks!

SOLNESS. At jeg burde ha’ gjort det.

(XII, p. 98-9)

Yet, Solness here embraces Hilde’s memories as close enough to the true version of events, thus problematising memory in the play even further. Arguably the most uncanny implication of memory in the play is that Hilde was “created” by her memories of the events at Lysanger. Near the end of the play, this is implied in the following enigmatic exchange:

SOLNESS (ser på hende med sænket hode). Hvorledes er De ble’t slig, som De er, Hilde?

HILDE. Hvorledes har De fåt mig til at bli’ slig, som jeg er?

(XII, p. 119)

Here the intertwinement of memory and identity is so complete that it can hardly be untangled. By this stage the fact that the memories are possibly no more than fantasies or dreams has become completely irrelevant to Solness too.

4.3 Heterotopia?

In the article “Of Other Spaces” which was published posthumously on the basis of lectures he gave in 1967, Michel Foucault describes heterotopias as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1986:24). He continues to argue that there is some “joint experience” between utopia (nowhere) and heterotopia, and describes the image one sees when looking in a mirror as one instance in which such an experience can be had, because in the mirror one sees oneself there where one is not, yet the mirror also exists in reality:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

(loc. cit.)

This location of heterotopia at the intersection between the utopian and reality corresponds to the notion of the gap, as hypothesised by the utopian theorist Louis Marin. Marin argues that the utopian ought to be situated

...in the place of a gap, an interval where our attempt of seeing together the dominating term and the dominated one, the beholding process and the fact or feeling to be seen, would change itself into a neutral or neutralizing relationship.

(1993:404)

For the purposes of this argument, I am however only going to use Foucault’s term. Although I think Foucault intends heterotopia particularly to be located in certain

social phenomena, I here argue that the image of castles in the air with solid foundations (and, to a certain extent, Solness's new house with its churchlike tower) is heterotopian in nature.

In my discussion of the performance space of *The Master Builder*, I have noted how performance can be located in the tension between the reality of the mechanics of theatre and the fictionality of the events performed on the stage. In *The Master Builder* itself, a similar tension between the realistic and fantastic is ever-present. As such, the image of castles in the air with solid foundations and that of the new house Solness has built (which combines the features of churches and the homes for human beings he had previously built) may be seen as hybrid images, which strive to bridge the gap between the fantastical (or utopian) and the real world in which the play is set. I also think that Solness's conception of a house with a church tower is the "real" counterpart to Hilde's "fantastical" castles in the air, to which he so insistently adds "solid foundations". In the light of this I think the use of the term "heterotopian" is justified in this regard.

From a cultural-historical perspective, the image of Solness's houses with church towers is quite interesting. Richard Sennett observes that the spires on many medieval European churches are nineteenth-century additions (1990:15), which was deemed necessary as the sanctuary of the church became less and less located in its inside, and shifted to its outside appearance. He also notes that the "cultural difficulty of enacting sanctuary in a secular society...appeared as a problem of visual design" and he articulates this problem as "how could the qualities of an immense structure like a cathedral be transposed to the scale of a house?" (1990:26). This seems

precisely the problem Solness tries to solve by adding a tower to his house. And, this is what Hilde suggests *before* she hears it is exactly what Solness has done with his new house (p. 810). Calderwood argues that Ibsen in *The Master Builder* “employ[s] the realistic as a foundation for the symbolic, so that the two comprise a single structure” and he sees the function of the symbolic as closing “the gap between the realistic and romantic by converting the wildly unrealistic into metaphors for the real” (1984:622-3). In my argument, because of the constant ambiguity of both the real and the fantastic, I prefer to call Calderwood’s symbolic heterotopian. As have been shown throughout the preceding discussions, the symbolism of *The Master Builder* is incredibly difficult to pin down and interpret, as it remains ambiguous on a variety of levels, thereby resisting any simple interpretation. Calderwood continues to relate “the impossible” of *The Master Builder*, especially as embodied in the climbing of the tower, but in my view likewise present in the building of castles in the air, to the attempt at realising a third empire in *Emperor and Galilean*, in that it is a “transcendent fusion of paganism and Christianity” (1984:628). Calderwood also relates the notion of the impossible to the “theatrical ‘wholeness’ produced by a union of author, actors, and audience” in which the actors and stage must “transcend their purely physical objectlike status” to create drama (1984:632).

As much as the new house with its tower is real (its reality is explicitly underscored by the fact that Solness falls to his death from the tower), so the castles in the air are unreal. Were it not for Solness’s insistence on adding solid foundations – which he presumably hopes to do by the ritual climbing of the tower of the new house and by making his statement to God, thus also re-enacting Hilde’s memories – the castles in the air would be mere nothingness. As Astrid Sæther observes, about the foundations

under these castles: “This paradoxical expression can be interpreted to mean creating a synthesis of utopia and reality but the fall from his own building leaves no doubt that the project is cracking up” (1998:155). Thus, at the end of the play, the castles in the air are shown for what they are, mere pipedreams. Admittedly they have proven fatal to Solness but there is nothing transcendent about them, at least not for Solness. This outcome should perhaps have been anticipated by Solness’s bleak appreciation of his life:

SOLNESS. ... (med en stille, forbittret latter.) Se, det er hele opgøret, så langt, så langt jeg ser tilbage. Ingenting bygget igrunden. Og ingenting ofret for at få bygge noget heller. Ingenting, ingenting — alt sammen.

(XII, p. 118)

Therefore it seems to me that the heterotopian aspect of *The Master Builder* is paradoxically constituted by supreme nothingness; that where the utopian and the real come together, no true hope is to be found. As I have noted in the previous chapter, the word which is repeated most often in the play is “aldrig” – never. To me, this seems to indicate a pervading attitude of “all or nothing” and with the failure to achieve *all*, the outcome inevitably is *nothing*. This is related to the absolute lack of a real home in modernity, as discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, Durbach insists that the “at the core of the modernist experience lies the paradoxically insistent presence of the non-existent, the disquieting recollection of certainty in the face of doubt, of substance now lost to emptiness.” (1994:108). Atle Kittang, however, sees this embracing of nothingness as an essential element of the uncanniness of Ibsenian heroism, which he relates to Brand’s proclamation that “the victory of victory is to lose all” (2006:323). However heroic Solness’s ascent of the tower may appear in this light, his insistence on anchoring the fantastical in reality is ultimately disastrous and foolhardy, and ends in his death. In his discussion of the utopian, Jameson emphasises the relationship between utopia and death:

For the relationship between Utopia and death is an essential one, but not because of any mystical properties of death itself: rather, death is the aftereffect and the sign that the perspective of Utopia has been reached, which consists in a great and progressive distance from all individual and existential experience, from individual people, from *characters* (to raise the related issue of Utopian discourse versus narrative or storytelling).

(1994:122)

Another paradox in the manner of Solness's death can be located in the public spectacle his climbing of the tower and his subsequent fall have become. Jameson describes the anonymity of utopia as "an intensely positive force, as the most fundamental fact of life of the democratic community; and it is this anonymity that in our non- or pre-Utopian world goes under the name and characterization of death" (1994:128). In my view this also corresponds to Solness's wish to build castles in the air – something for which he would never achieve the renown he appears to crave. Yet, the public nature of his death seems to largely undo the very private nature of the castles in the air he wants to build with Hilde, as discussed previously.

The incongruity of houses with church steeples and castles in the air with solid foundations thus underlines the imminent failure of all of Solness's projects. Just as he could not devote his life to the building of churches and had been unable to build happy homes for human beings in a modern world in which people has become uprooted and "unhoused", Solness is ultimately unable to escape the inevitability of reality and the next generation which awaits to take his place. The heterotopia or "other place" Solness attempts to reach proves as much of a "no-place" as all daydreams.

Conclusion

In this thesis on the spatiality of *The Master Builder*, I have argued that the play is dominated by spatial concerns. This can be seen on a variety of different levels and in a number of ways. On the most basic level, the play is the product of a specific cultural-historic space, namely modernity as experienced in the latter nineteenth century. In this regard I have particularly discussed the changing conception of space during this time, as for example manifested in the new importance accorded negative space, and in the uncanny loss of a true home in modernity. Additionally, a certain type of spatiality is evoked by the genre of the play. Even though Ibsen's prose plays bear close resemblances to the modern novel, *The Master Builder* is still written as a *play*, which inevitable calls the theatre to mind. The theatre itself constitutes a very peculiar space with its specific characteristics and conventions. Furthermore, because of the meta-dramatic nature of so much of this play, the performance space of the theatre is to a certain extent replicated and reflected in the internal performance space of the text. In the second chapter, I have focussed on the spatiality of the play as it manifests in the stage descriptions and dialogue of *The Master Builder*.

Due to its subject-matter, the scenery and thematics of the play are interwoven in a rather curious way. In this regard, the background of reality provided by its setting (and the action, especially in the beginning) both complements the imagery of the dialogue, and is juxtaposed with the fantastical nature of this imagery. This can especially be seen in the uncanny nature of the home in *The Master Builder*. Solness is unable to replicate the homeliness of Aline's childhood home which burned down. Despite the outward appearance of that house, Solness remembers it as a happy place.

Yet, the homes he wanted to build for human beings could never be truly happy. This fact is emphasised by the unhappiness of his present home, which fundamental unhomeliness is further underscored by the ghostly presence of the empty nurseries. Additionally, all the main characters have peculiar relationships with space. Solness perceives almost everything in terms of his trade, while Hilde's fantasies find architectural expression. Aline is inextricably bound to the memories of her old home which burned down with all her treasured possessions.

Yet, the play is also spatial in the light of its undermined temporality. Because of the frequent telling of stories, memories and dreams, and by the constant repetition of words and images, *The Master Builder* has a certain static quality, despite its chronological progression. Although I have argued throughout that spatiality is not to be located in the utter denial of temporality, the intrusion of the past into the present complicates the temporality of the play considerably. If one adds to this the dubious nature of the past, the difficulties in interpreting the play are multiplied.

By discussing the spatiality of *The Master Builder*, one does not arrive at any unambiguous interpretation. On the contrary, the possibilities for interpretation and the ambivalence of the play just appear more intriguing. I began this thesis by saying that the play simultaneously invites and mocks closer examination. Just one of the ways in which this takes place, is through the ambiguity of its spatiality. *The Master Builder* teems with spatial imagery, and its spatiality both facilitates and shapes the action and dialogue. Despite of the importance of what is *seen* or *said*, as it finds expression in the scenery and imagery, that which is *unseen* or which remains *unsaid* is perhaps as important for any interpretation of the play. Yet a definitive reading of

its spatiality perhaps constitutes another heterotopia, located somewhere slightly beyond language – it remains as elusive as a castle in the air, even if it has the solid foundation of the text below.

Bibliography

- Ibsen, Henrik. 1965. *The Complete Major Prose Plays*. Translated by Rolf Fjelde. New York: Plume.
- 1928-57. *Samlede Verker: Hundreårsutgave*. Ved Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht og Didrik Arup Seip, bind I-XXI. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Secondary sources:**
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. [1958.] *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon.
- Barranger, M.S. 1972. Ibsen's "Strange Story" in *The Master Builder: A Variation in Technique*, *Modern Drama*, vol. 15, no 2, pp. 175-184.
- Berman, Marshall. 1982. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. London: Verso.
- Booth, Michael R. 1995. Nineteenth-Century Theatre. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Edited by John Russel Brown. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Brook, Peter. 1968. *The Empty Space*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.
- Brockett, Oscar G. 1999. *History of the Theatre, 8th Edition*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brustein, Robert. 1980. *Critical Moments: Reflection on Theatre & Society 1973-1979*. New York: Random House.
- Brynhildsvoll, Knut. 1993. *Der literarische Raum: Konzeptionen und Entwürfe*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. (Beiträge zur Skandinavistik, Band 11.)
- Calderwood, James, L. 1984. *The Master Builder and the Failure of Symbolic Success*, *Modern Drama*, vol. 27, no 4, pp. 616-636.
- Dines Johansen, Jørgen. 2002. Mimetic and Diegetic Space in Ibsen's Late Plays. Ibsen Conference (2001: Rome). *Ibsen and the Arts: Painting – Sculpture – Architecture*. Edited by Astrid Sæther. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. Pp. 133-49.
- 1980. Om sammenhængen mellem religiøs, sexuel og social tematik i Ibsens *Bygmester Solness*. *Text/Historie: Bidrag til historisering af tekstlæsning i gymnasiet*. Redigert af Finn Hauberg Mortensen. København: Samlerens Forlag. Pp. 39-60.
- Dines Johansen, Jørgen & Wiingaard, Jytte. 1982. Description and Depiction: On the Indexical Function of the Icon in the Staging of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*,

- Degrés: Revue de Synthèse à Orientation Sémeiologique*, vol. 10, no 31, pp. f1-7.
- Durbach, Errol. 1994. The Modernist Malaise; “Nichts og Ingenting” at the Core of Ibsen’s Onion. VII International Ibsen Conference (1993: Grimstad). *Proceedings*. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. Pp. 108-120.
- Elliot, Kari. 1979. *The Master Builder: Houses Built on Rock and Sand*. *Edda*, vol. 79, no 6, pp. 365-373.
- Engelstad, Fredrik. 1994. The Defeat of Failure and the Failure of Success: Gender Roles and Images of the Male in Henrik Ibsen’s Last Four Plays. VII International Ibsen Conference (1993: Grimstad). *Proceedings*. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. Pp. 390-405.
- Esslin, Martin. 1980. Ibsen and Modern Drama. *Ibsen and the Theatre*. Edited by Errol Durbach. London: Macmillan.
- Everist, Kirk Andrew. 2000. *The House of Memory: Theatre as Mnemonic Space*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of California.
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina. 1994. The last plays. *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. Edited by James McFarlane. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. Pp. 126-154.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. Of Other Spaces. Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no 1, pp. 22-7.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2003. [1919.] The Uncanny. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. London: Penguin. Pp. 121-162.
- Gray, Ronald. 1977. *Ibsen – A Dissenting View: A study of the last twelve plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Gullestad, Siri. 1994. Fear of Falling: Some Unconscious Factors in Ibsen’s play *The Master Builder*. VII International Ibsen Conference (1993: Grimstad). *Proceedings*. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. Pp. 451-463.
- Haugen, Einar. 1979. *Ibsen’s Drama: Author to Audience*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Helland, Frode. 1997. *Melankoliens spill: En studie I Henrik Ibsens siste skuespill*. Doktorgradavhandling. Universitetet i Oslo.
- 1994. “Play Within the Play” – Meta-drama and Modernity in *The Master Builder*. VII International Ibsen Conference (1993: Grimstad). *Proceedings*.

- Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. Pp. 309-319.
- Holtan, Orley, I. 1970. *Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hornby, Richard. 1983. Deconstructing realism in Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. *Essays in Theatre*, vol. 2, no 1, pp. 33-40.
- Innes, Christopher (ed.). 2000. *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*. London: Routledge.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2002. *A singular modernity: Essay on the ontology of the present*. London: Verso.
- 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Johnston, Brian. 1989. *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*. Boston: Twayne.
- 1975. *The Ibsen Cycle*. Boston: Twayne.
- Kermode, Frank. 1978. "A Reply to Joseph Frank", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 4, no 3, pp. 579-88.
- Kern, Stephen. 1983. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
- Kittang, Atle. 2006. Ibsen, Heroism, and the Uncanny, *Modern Drama*, vol. 43, no 3, pp. 304-26.
- 2002. *Ibsens heroisme: Frå Brand til Når vi døde vågner*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- 1979. Realisme som myte-kritikk i *Bygmester Solness*. *En ny Ibsen? Ni Ibsen-artikler*. Redigert av Harald Noreng. Oslo: Gyldendal. Pp. 100-113.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. [1974.] *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lyche, Lise. 1991. *Norges teaterhistorie*. Asker: Tell.
- Marin, Louis. 1993. Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no 3, pp. 397-420.
- McAuley, Gay. 1999. *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (Theater: Theory/Text/Performance.)
- McFarlane, James. 1989. *Ibsen & Meaning: Studies, Essays & Prefaces 1953-87*. Norwich: Norvik Press.
- Moi, Toril. 2006. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- 2001. Ibsen's Anti-Theatrical Aesthetic: *Pillars of Society* and *The Wild Duck*.

- IX International Ibsen Conference (2000: Bergen). 2000. *Proceedings*. Edited by Pål Bjørby & Asbjørn Aarseth. Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide. Pp 29-47.
- More, Thomas. 1995. [ca. 1515.] *Utopia: Latin Text and English Translation*. Edited by George M. Logan *et al.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Møller, Lis. 2001. Repetition, return, and doubling in Henrik Ibsen's major prose plays. Translated by Patricia Lunddahl. *Ibsen Studies*, vol. 1, no 2, pp.7-31.
- Nerlich, Graham. 1976. *The Shape of Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Northam, John. 1953. *Ibsen's Dramatic Method: A Study of the Prose Dramas*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Nygaard, Jon. 1997. Ibsen and the Drama of Modernity, *Nordic Theatre Studies*, vol. 10, pp. 84-99.
- 1992. *Teatrets historie i Europa, Del 2: Teatret fra 1750 til 1900: Det offisielle teatret*. Oslo: Spillerom.
- Ott, Michaela. 2003. Raum. *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler. Band 5, S. 113-48.
- Owen, Alex. 2001. Occultism and the 'Modern' Self in *Fin-de-siècle* Britain. In *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II*. Edited by Bernhard Rieger & Martin Daunton. Oxford: Berg. Pp. 71-96.
- Oxfeldt, Elisabeth. 2005. *Nordic Orientalism: Paris and the Cosmopolitan Imagination 1800-1900*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Rieger, Bernhard & Daunton, Martin. 2001. Introduction. *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian era to World War II*. Edited by Bernhard Rieger & Martin Daunton. Oxford: Berg. Pp. 1-21.
- Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Rønning, Helge. 2006. *Den umulige friheten: Henrik Ibsen og moderniteten*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- 1994. Byen og hjemmene – Gesellschaft og Gemeinschaft – modernitet og tradisjon: En undersøkelse av noen tematiske sammenhenger i 1800-tallets europeiske litteratur og i Henrik Ibsens *Bygmester Solness*. *Con amore: Festskrift til Arne Hanevik på 70-årsdagen 15.12.1994*. Redigert av Kari Gundersen og Hans H. Skei. Oslo: Aschehoug. Pp. 91-120.
- 1994. Ibsen and the Ambivalence of Modernity. VII International Ibsen Conference (1993: Grimstad). *Proceedings*. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies.

Pp. 48-63.

- Sandberg, Mark B. 2001. Ibsen and the Mimetic Home of Modernity, *Ibsen Studies*, vol. 1, no 2, pp. 32-58.
- Schaer, Roland. 2000. Utopia: Space, Time, History. *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. Edited by Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys & Lyman Tower Sargent. New York & Oxford: The New York Public Library & Oxford UP. Pp. 3-7.
- Sennett, Richard. 1990. *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Sklar, Lawrence. 1998. Time. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Vol. 9, pp. 413-6.
- Skoie, Marie. 2002. *Da tiden ble normal: Innføringen av fellestid i Norge på slutten av 1800-tallet*. Hovedoppgave. Universitetet i Oslo.
- Sudjic, Deyan. 2005. *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World*. New York: Penguin.
- Sutton, Walter. 1957. The Literary Image and the Reader: A Consideration of the Theory of Spatial Form, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 16, pp. 112-123.
- Sæther, Astrid. 1998. The Significance of "Place" in the Age of Decadence: A Reading of Three Plays by Henrik Ibsen. Die 8. Internationalen Ibsen-Konferenz (1997: Gossensaß). *Kongreßakten: Ibsen im europäischen Spannungsfeld zwischen Naturalismus und Symbolismus*. Herausgegeben von Maria Deppermann *et al.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. Pp. 147-59.
- Theoharis, Constantine Theoharis. 1996. *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Thomson, Mathew. 2001. Psychology and the 'Consciousness of Modernity' in Early Twentieth-Century Britain. *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II*. Edited by Bernhard Rieger & Martin Daunt. Oxford: Berg. Pp. 97-115.
- Torretti, Roberto. 1998. Space. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Vol. 9, pp. 59-66.
- 1998. Spacetime. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Vol. 9, pp. 66-70.
- Vidler, Anthony. 1992. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern*

- Unhomely*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Williams, Simon. 1994. Ibsen and the Theatre 1877-1900. *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. Edited by James McFarlane. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. Pp. 165-182.
- Østerud, Erik. 2002. In Pandora's Jar: Ibsen's *Master Builder* in between Antiquity and Modernity. Ibsen Conference (2001: Rome). *Ibsen and the Arts: Painting – Sculpture – Architecture*. Edited by Astrid Sæther. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. Pp. 61-69.
- 1998. *Theatrical and Narrative Space: Studies in Strindberg, Ibsen and J.P. Jacobsen*. Aarhus: Aarhus UP.
- 1994. Myth and Modernity: Henrik Ibsen's Double-drama, *Scandinavica*, vol. 33, no 2, pp. 161-82.
- Aarseth, Asbjørn. 1999. *Ibsens samtidsskuespill: En studie i glasskapets dramaturgi*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Appendix A

A short paraphrase of the six attitudes towards literally space as identified by Knut Brynhildsvoll in *Der literarische Raum* (1993:8-9):

1. Space merely serves as a background and framework for a work that is non-spatial in character. There is only a literal relationship between characters and space.
2. Actors are for better or worse subjected and delivered to a space which acts as a force of destiny.
3. Character and space are in complete harmony and illuminate each other, whilst each retains its independence.
4. Space appears as a sounding board for emotions and atmosphere and as such the boundaries between the inner and outer spheres are blurred. Inside the character a recognisable reality can be found and the character similarly recognises him- or herself in the outside order of the world.
5. Space is transformed into an expression of the subjective and becomes the projection of spiritual or psychological contents and thus evaporates into the abstract or fantastical.
6. Things from the outside world serve as props and building blocks for purely symbolical or mythical world designs, which do not maintain the status quo, but rather transform it in its otherness, thus conferring a deeper meaning on it.¹

In Brynhildsvoll's view, some overarching attitudes to space may be observed: the first three attitudes identified above form a group retaining space as an autonomous area; the fourth presents a transition in which the outer and inner fuse; the last two form a group which depends on the availability of a "creator" to endow articles with entirely different functions (1993:10).

¹ About this last group, he writes the following: "Der reale Raum mit seinem individuellen Erscheinungsformen wird derart transformiert, daß er etwas ganz anderes, viel Allgemeineres meint. Der dargestellte Raum nimmt metaphorische, bildsprachliche Züge an, verweist auf ein ihn Überschreitendes, als dessen Stellvertreter erscheint. So entstehen mit Hilfe räumlicher Gestaltung symbolische, allegorische, mythische Funktionsgebilde" (1993:10).

Appendix B

A short overview of the different categories of performance space as identified by Gay McAuley (1999:24-34). She concedes that listing the different categories may create the impression of a hierarchical order or of the mutual exclusivity of categories (1999:33), but it may still be the clearest way to convey it, so I summarise her conception here as follows, with her categories in italics:

1. *The social reality of the theatre experience.* McAuley investigates the interaction between audience and performers and how the social significance of attending a theatrical performance has changed through history.
 - a. *Theatre space* refers to the location of the theatre building in the city, its architecture and design. This space is divided into the areas where people work and the areas in which (other) people are entertained.
 - i. *Audience space* is essentially intended for socialising and includes the entrances, foyers, box office, corridors, refreshment areas and the auditorium. Historically, audience space has served in various ways to divide the audience into different classes or to emphasise these divides.
 - ii. *Practitioner space* comprises the traditional “backstage” area, including the entrances to the theatre never used by the public, the dressing rooms and the stage itself.
 - iii. *Performance space* is located where the audience space and practitioner space interact to constitute the performance. This means that during a performance, part of the audience space (auditorium) and part of the practitioner space (stage) together constitute the performance space. McAuley emphasises that some types of performance, like street performance, would have no theatre space, but inevitably, will have some performance space (1999:26).
 - b. *Rehearsal space* is deemed as important in the development of the performance by McAuley and in her study she discusses some examples of the way in which the physical characteristics of this space may shape the final performance.
2. *The physical/fictional relationship.* This is the constant dual presence of the physical reality of the performance space and the fictional world that is

created. She asserts that the space the spectator is watching during a performance is “always both stage and somewhere else” (1999:28).

- a. *Stage space* exists because the stage is always to some degree seen and used as a stage during the performance.
 - b. *Presentational space* in McAuley’s view is constituted by the scenery, décor, set, actors, props, lighting and the physical presence of actors.
 - c. *Fictional places* are the spaces “presented, represented or evoked onstage and off” (1999:29). McAuley emphasises that the fictional place is broader than the locus dramatis, although that is included in this space. She sees the fictional place as so complex, that it has to be seen as a main category in order to tease out the different nuances.
3. *Location and fiction.* This is essentially a detailed categorisation of the *fictional place* mentioned above. What is of importance here “is not the number of places nor even the method by which they are suggested but their anchorage in relation to the physical space” (1999:30).
- a. *Onstage fictional place* is the place physically represented on the stage, by the use of scenery or through the actor(s).
 - b. *Offstage fictional place.* McAuley asserts that different categories of offstage space are needed, because “the function of the fictional place does change, depending on its location in relation to presentational space, stage space, and even audience space” (1999:30-31).
 - i. *Unlocalised in relation to performance space:* places that are part of the dramatic geography of the action, but are not situated in relation to the onstage.
 - ii. *Localised in relation to performance space:* places localised in relation to the onstage by, for example, entrances, exists, glances, words and gestures.
 - *Contiguous/Remote spectrum:* places can either be contiguous with the onstage, i.e. accessed through doors or windows, or can be more distanced, but located through the performance.
 - *Audience off.* This is when, through the performance, the offstage place is indicated to be located where the audience is, for example by the actors looking or pointing in the direction of the spectators.

4. *Textual space* is constituted by the spatial references included in the stage directions and dialogue of the text, and specifically the importance of these references for the performance. Here she distinguishes between intra-dialogical (spatial references in the dialogue) and extra-dialogical elements, such as scene descriptions and stage directions.
5. *Thematic space* is the meaning conveyed created by spatiality. McAuley emphasises that the way the space is “conceived and organized, the kinds of space that are shown and/or evoked, the values and events associated with them, and the relationship between them are always of fundamental importance in the meaning conveyed” irrespective of “whether one is working exclusively with the play as written text or with the play in performance” (1999:32).